

NUMBER SEVEN BRICK ROW

By the author of
WINDYRIDGE



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NUMBER SEVEN BRICK ROW

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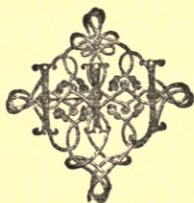
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NUMBER SEVEN BRICK ROW

BY
W. RILEY



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DEDICATION

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MRS. TICKLE,
WHEREVER SHE MAY BE FOUND AND BY
WHATEVER NAME SHE MAY BE KNOWN.

W. R.

DEDICATION

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MRS. JACOB
WHITFIELD SEE MAY BE FOUND AND BY
WHATEVER NAME SHE MAY BE KNOWN.

W. B.

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NUMBER SEVEN BRICK ROW

CHAPTER I

PROVIDENCE DIRECTS CONSTABLE SMITH, AND
CONSTABLE SMITH DIRECTS SAM MUNDAY.

“YESSIR.”

“Don’t say ‘yessir’ every blooming time, same as a doll with a squeak in its stomach,” growled Constable Smith.

“You can say words of more than one syllable, can’t you?”

The youth looked into the man’s face and wondered how much humanity might hide behind the grim mask of the officer. “Yess—” he began, and stifled the reply in the utterance; then conjured his brains for another answer, and failing to find one resorted to a time-honoured expedient, took off his cap and scratched his head.

The constable put his hand on the lad’s shoulder and turned him so that the light from a street arc lamp fell upon his face. They were standing in the middle of the road at a crossing in the centre of the city, but it was nine o’clock at night and there was not much traffic to regulate.

“Well,” said the officer after a steady look, “I shall know you again, my lad, if I come across you. Now let’s see if I’ve got the tale right. You’ve left home for good : age sixteen : tramped ten miles : going

to look for work in t'morning : meanwhile want bed and breakfast, to say naught of supper : total funds fourpence : and will I tell you of a decent place where you can get 'em for the money. Is that it?"

"Yessir."

"Then you've signed your depositions and we can go forrad. What did you say they called you?"

"Sam Munday," replied the youth, who had not been asked previously for the information.

"Sam Munday," echoed the officer. He pulled out his pocket-book and began to make an entry painfully with numbed fingers. "And this is Shrove Tuesday. That's a rum 'un, isn't it?"

"Yessir," the lad answered with a grin. He was beginning to feel hopeful, recognising that behind the official there was a man and possibly a humorist.

"Well, Sam Munday," the constable went on, slowly, for he was thinking hard, "there are doss-houses I could send you to, but you look a better sort than some, and we'll try another plan." He tore a slip from his pocket-book and handed it to the lad.

"Take that and give it to Mrs. Tickle, 7, Brick Row, Brickfields, and tell her what you've told me. And just take the stoppers out of your ears while I tell you how to find the place."

The explanation was prolonged, as other matters kept claiming the officer's attention, but it was finished at last, and Sam prepared to move off. He had to repeat the instructions, however, before he was allowed to leave, and the constable detected a misconception and became sarcastic.

"Built of brick? Who said it was built of brick? I told you that you'd pass Wood Street, but it isn't built of wood; and Silver Street, but if you've been

thinking of pinching some you'll be disappointed, my lad. Now let's see you get a move on."

The next moment he recalled him. A reluctant hand was in the officer's trousers pocket.

"Fourpence'll none go so far," he growled, as if he felt the lad's impecuniosity to be a personal grievance, "and I'm not a blooming Guild of Help, but here's another twopence for you. Shrove Tuesday comes only once in t' year and Sam Munday 'ud better not come so oft."

The lad thanked him and moved away in the direction of the constable's finger.

"I'll know 'im again," he said to himself. "L751 his number was. Jiminy! who'd ha' thought o' getting twopence out of a cop? Now for the other party, name o' Tickle. Gosh!"

When he got into the broad thoroughfare that led to the insalubrious residential district of Brickfields the shops were all ablaze with light and the boy loitered. He was hungry and for the time being a capitalist, and he knew that he was in a position to take the edge off his appetite and still have a small reserve to carry forward to the next day, and he was in the habit of leaving the morrow to look after itself; but he was shrewd enough to curb his desires until he should have seen what was in store for him at the mysterious 7, Brick Row.

By-and-by he left the main road and turned into Rose Street, chuckling to himself as he read the name.

"It isn't built o' roses, anyway," he said. "It's another sort o' niff to what you get out o' scent bottles. Beats the old 'ouse at 'ome, this does."

He inquired his way of a group of women who were gathered about the door of a public-house and found

that Brick Row was only a few hundred yards distant—near enough to secure its share of the perfume exhaled from the rose garden.

“Who’re you wantin’ i’ t’ Row?” inquired the woman who replied to his question.

“T’ Lord Mayor,” replied Sam readily. “He’s asked me to ’ave supper with ’im.”

“Go on, impidence,” retorted the woman; and Lady Peggy, who was leaving the house on her way to business, laughed.

“One for you, Poll,” she remarked.

Brick Row was a decided improvement on its neighbour. It was a very narrow street, but the houses, though low and of the back-to-back variety, were stone built and fairly clean-looking. One would have said at first glance that there was a monotonous uniformity about them, for the bedroom windows were all of a size and the tops touched the roof, and the street was straight enough to illustrate the rules of perspective; but appearances were misleading. The lower windows shewed a singular variety in shape and size. Some were shuttered from the outside; some had two panes, others four, others again a dozen small ones. A few were curtained, but many had not even blinds, and where these were provided only one occupant here and there troubled to draw them, and Sam had no scruples that prevented him from seeing all that was to be seen. He could not fail to notice a remarkable disparity, for whilst some of the rooms were comfortable and even inviting, others were wretchedly furnished, squalid and filthy. He speedily drew his own conclusions.

“Rose Street’s rags an’ tatters,” he said. “Brick Row’s patches.” It was a true description.

It was close on ten o'clock when he knocked at the door of No. 7, and as the blinds there were drawn, anything in the nature of scouting was made impossible. He knocked, and almost before he had removed his hand the door was opened and Mrs. Tickle's form was silhouetted against the frame of light from the kitchen.

"Now, my boy?" she asked, and Sam said :

"Please, if you're Mrs. Tickle, t' p'liceman said would you read this."

He shoved the paper into her hand, but she betrayed none of the astonishment he had expected.

"Come inside," she said; and the lad obeyed.

The outer door opened upon a small vestibule, something more than a yard square, at the end of which was the flight of stone steps that led to the bedrooms, and an inner door to the left gave access to the living-room. Sam took the polished chair that had been offered and looked about him with interest, and at once became uncomfortably conscious that he was very dirty, the result of finding himself in a home that was spotlessly clean. It was not at all a large room, and it was much lower than present-day hygienists would approve, but it was warm and cosy-looking. In the bottom of the window, which was so wide as to suggest that the house might once have been a shop, there were several hardy plants in big earthenware pots. A cheap drugget covered the greater part of the stone floor, and a tab hearthrug, with a design in gay scarlet to relieve the blackness of the groundwork, lay before the fire. A table, spread for supper, was in the middle of the room underneath the incandescent gas, and a little old man was sitting up to it with his elbows resting on the white cloth and

a knife and fork upraised in readiness for operations. Facing him was Mrs. Tickle's empty chair, which had evidently been pushed back at Sam's summons. There was a ravishingly appetising smell of cooked ham pervading the room.

Mrs. Tickle had read slowly, and she turned from the cramped handwriting on the policeman's scrap of paper to a perusal of the human document that sat on the edge of the chair, twirling his cap and looking hopefully into her eyes. Hopefully, because Sam was a reader of character, and although the woman's face was sharp and she was obviously not a "softy," he felt certain she was good-natured. The grey eyes were shrewd but not unkind; there was strength in the mouth and jaw, but not severity.

The old man at the table fidgetted.

"It'll be getting cold, lass," he complained.

"So it will," said Mrs. Tickle, who as yet had not spoken a word to the lad. "So it will, and that 'ud be a pity, Mr. Long." She glanced doubtfully at the new guest. "'Ere," she continued, "give us your cap and you can tell us your tale as we get wer bit o' supper. Off you go into t' scullery and wash your 'ands and face."

Sam went—it was impossible to lose his way—and returned in a few minutes smelling strongly of soap. His hands were clean, but his finger nails were in deep mourning—a blemish of which he was blissfully unconscious. Mrs. Tickle had brought out another cup and plate and Sam found that he was expected to occupy the polished chair that she had drawn up to the table. Grace before meat had been dispensed with and Sam was not conscious of the omission; all the same, deep down in his heart he was returning thanks

to P.C. 751 L and extolling the wise thought that had vetoed the expenditure of a penny on an unnecessary supper.

Mr. Long's elbows were no longer on the table, and his knife and fork were working as rapidly as if he had contracted to finish a congenial job in a time that left no margin for delays. His eyes were bent upon his plate, and he had apparently no interest in the newcomer or in the perplexities of his hostess. What his hand had found to do he was doing with his might. Mrs. Tickle, on the contrary, was deep in a problem, and her looks were divided between the portion of ham that remained on the dish and the two plates that were still empty. Finally she put a spoonful of the drip on one of the plates and pushed the dish and its contents towards the hungry boy.

"You might as well 'ave it all," she said, "for I care naught much about it." Then, being a conscientious woman she corrected herself. "Anyway we've driven t' supper rather late, and meat lays a bit 'eavy at bed-time."

If Sam had been a well-trained boy he would not have accepted what he well knew to be a sacrifice until he had protested and been over-persuaded, but he had not been well trained; he therefore took the meat and ate it with great satisfaction, untroubled by any gloomy anticipations of evil to follow, and Mrs. Tickle sopped her bread in the drip and enjoyed the blessedness of the cheerful giver.

It was not until Mr. Long had finished his repast and Sam had begun to shew signs of dwindling interest in his food that Mrs. Tickle questioned the boy. His answers were ready enough. His father was always leathering him; his stepmother ("stepmother" was

a euphemism, but Sam made the concession to the proprieties ungrudgingly) was "the limit" in tyranny and "lip"; life had become unbearable; and when, having lost his job, he had been driven out and told it was time for him to become self-supporting, Sam, who was an optimist, had found the prospect not without its allurements. "Home, sweet home," was the place that contained his bitterest memories. The world was big and he was little: there would be room for him somewhere. By nine o'clock the same night he had put ten miles between himself and his past, and the fate that watches over optimists had directed him to P.C. 751 L, and to the generous, self-sacrificing Mrs. Tickle. That was the story in a nutshell.

He had been allowed to tell his tale in his own way without more interruption than an occasional challenge when there seemed to be a discrepancy, and Mr. Long, who had drawn his chair up to the fire and taken a short clay pipe from his waistcoat pocket, had made no comment of any kind. Mrs. Tickle was a wise woman, however, and she asked a few shrewd questions when the narrative ended, which were answered satisfactorily.

"Well," she said at length in a sharp, almost snappish voice, as she rose and began to clear the table, "he's done it on me again, 'as Frank, and I'll curl 'is 'air for 'im when I see 'im. 'Owever, we can't expect you to sleep in t' gutter. I don't know what our Maud Annie'll say when she comes in, but you can stop 'ere while morning and I'll turn it over in my mind. You'll manage on t' sofa, won't you, with a rug or something thrown over you to keep you warm?"

Sam's eyes shone. Manage! He was on velvet at the very outset of his career.

"Yes'm," he said in a tone of deep conviction.

"Sarah Tickle," Mr. Long piped tremulously, with his eyes on the glowing coals, "you're a fool. You're as poor as a crow."

Just a quiver of apprehension passed over Sam's heart. Was this little old man with the wizened face and the thin grey hair a potential enemy? He was a pitiable object—so wasted that his poor frayed clothes hung loosely on his slender frame—and Sam said to himself that he had seen men as good as he hung on sticks to frighten birds; and yet insignificant as he was he might be powerful enough to put a spoke in the wheel of good fortune. Mrs. Tickle's prompt reply reassured him.

"A fool, am I? Well, that's as may be, Mr. Long," she said tartly. "It's one o' my sayings 'at I never knew nob'dy lose naught by doing a kindness—not i' t' long run; and you can sometimes entertain angels unawares. Not 'at either you or this lad looks like angels, unless t' picture books is naught to go by; but 'ow *you* can fashion to say aught after t' supper you've polished off, I can't think. But that's where it is—they's always most to say 'at could do to keep their mouths shut. You want to remember, Mr. Long, 'at it's a safe rule to be done as you'd be done by, and when a body 'asn't much 'ead learning they can't do better nor fall back on it."

Mrs. Tickle's mouth closed with a snap, and she did not speak again until the pots had been put away, for all this time she had been washing and drying them. Mr. Long's head was in his hands, his elbows were on his knees, and his eyes still fixed on the fire.

He made little gurgling noises with his lips as he puffed at his pipe, but his face was absolutely expressionless. Sam was sitting on the polished chair which Mrs. Tickle now bade him bring up to the hearth.

"Poor as a crow, am I?" she continued after an interval. "And 'ow do you make it out 'at t' crows are poor, Mr. Long?" She waited, but there was no reply. "Their clothes cost 'em naught, and they get enough to live on and sometimes more nor t' farmers cares for 'em to 'ave. I don't know much about crows, but what I've seen 'as seemed perky enough."

For all the notice Mr. Long took he might not have heard a word of this harangue, and Mrs. Tickle regarded him defiantly. She was of short stature, rather dumpily built, and as she looked down at the old man with her hands on her hips she reminded Sam, who had been in the toy trade, of Mrs. Noah in the Ark.

At last a smile appeared at the corners of the woman's mouth.

"I don't reckon to be religious," she said, "but I make a practice o' reading a chapter before I go to bed, and I can find you t' place where it says something about crows."

Thereupon she went up to the high chest of drawers that faced the fireplace—a wonderful piece of furniture, Sam thought it, with its glass knobs and green glass supports, and mahogany surface polished until Mrs. Tickle's white apron was reflected upon it as in a mirror—and took down a bulky Bible which she carried to her high-backed chair by the fireplace. The book sloped dangerously as it lay upon her lap, and Mr. Long, allowing his glance to wander in that direction, observed that whilst some of the pages were as straight

and clean as when they issued from the press, others were yellow and soiled, with margins so well thumbled in many places that stamp-edging had been requisitioned to keep them together.

"There seems to be lots o' waters you 'aven't fished in, Mrs. Tickle," he said with a chuckle that sent a faint smile over his dried cheeks.

"I fish where I know I shall catch something," retorted Mrs. Tickle promptly. "There's no sense in doing aught no different. Mr. Brown, t' Scripture reader, tells 'at 'e's read t' Book through nine times and 'as got as far as t' Judges wi' t' tenth, but if you know 'im, Mr. Long, you'll be o' my way o' thinking. 'E can talk by t' hour, but it's same as if 'is reading's all turned to bile, for a longer-faced and crosser-tempered man you won't find i' all t' Brickfields."

Mrs. Tickle's mouth again shut tightly, and she went on turning over the pages with the help of a frequently wetted thumb until she found what she sought.

"Listen to this," she said triumphantly.

"'Be'old the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns: yet your 'eavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?'"

She read on to the end of the chapter—very slowly, but with an emphasis that told of familiarity and approval—and the man and boy listened without interrupting her. Sam, casting his eye back upon the events of the evening, began dimly to perceive that optimism might be based upon authority.

"Now then, Mr. Long," concluded Mrs. Tickle, "what about your poor crows? You see I fish where I know I can catch, Mr. Long."

Mrs. Tickle's grey eyes twinkled a little, but her mouth was firmly closed and she looked like a woman prepared for battle. There was no change, however, in the expression of Mr. Long's set face, and he was spared the necessity of replying by the raising of the latch and the entrance of Maud Annie.

"Eh, mother," she began, "we've had a champion time, Louisa and me—— Who's this?"

Her mother had nodded her head in the direction of Sam, and she now briefly explained the boy's presence. A cloud passed over the girl's face.

"It's fair sickening," she said sullenly. "We shall be all murdered in our beds one o' these nights, shan't we, Mr. Long?"

She was removing her hat as she spoke, and she went up to the glass that hung upon the wall and gave a few angry admonitory pats to her hair—why, it might be difficult to explain, as she immediately announced her intention to go to bed.

Mr. Long had turned a deaf ear to the invitation to take sides, but he was not impervious to the hint that had accompanied it, for he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and said he must be going. Mrs. Tickle barred the door after him and called to her daughter that she would follow in a few minutes. There was a short colloquy upon the stairs and Sam knew that he was the subject of discussion. It must be admitted that he was not seriously disturbed, though he heard Maud Annie complain that they might well be poor when her mother was always throwing money down the drain. He was a sharp boy, but no worrier, and he liked the look of Mrs. Tickle and had already pinned his faith to her. He therefore awaited that lady's return without trepidation.

CHAPTER II

SAM MUNDAY EXPERIENCES A SECOND STROKE OF LUCK.

THE only warning Mrs. Tickle thought it necessary to give was that Sam should not touch the fire. A dozen others that had suggested themselves to Maud Annie the mother's maturer judgment rejected. She had brought out a couple of big dust-sheets and a heavy shawl which were to serve as bed-clothes. The sofa was upholstered in horse-hair and was narrow as well as slippery. Mrs. Tickle looked at it with her hands on her hips.

"You'd better put up a bit of a prayer to be kept from falling off," she said grimly. "You don't say long prayers, I reckon?"

Sam grinned and made no other reply.

"There was a rhyme we used to say when I was a little lass," Mrs. Tickle continued; "'at might do for you—

" 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
Bless the bed 'at I sleep on.'

There's one thing about it—if you wrap yourself up well you'll none break t' flags if you chance to roll off i' your sleep."

With this she wished him good-night and turned out

the gas, pausing at the door to say in a tone that was half-earnest, half-humorous :

“It ’ud none ’urt you to begin and say your prayers now ’at you’re starting on your own.”

Sam’s thoughts busied themselves with this recommendation as he pulled off his boots. It is hardly necessary to remark that as the son of poor and decidedly dishonest parents he had not been trained in religious habits, and if the suggestion had come from any other person than Mrs. Tickle it would have been promptly rejected. As it was, Sam felt that it must be considered.

The cinders still glowed in the grate, though the flames had died down, and a piece of coal hung, half-burnt, at the side like a cliff that threatened to fall at any moment into the red sea. If Sam had not been there it would have been removed to the back as tinder for the morrow, but Mrs. Tickle had renounced that small economy in the boy’s favour. Sam left the couch and went over to the fire, seating himself in Mr. Long’s chair and holding his head in his hands as that gentleman had done. Thus he reviewed the events of the evening and considered the situation.

First of all he got rid of the prayer difficulty, and as he knew nothing of form and ritual and orthodox preliminaries, but felt that he must oblige Mrs. Tickle by doing his best, he went straight to the heart of things and addressed the Unknown as he would have done a pal who was in a position to do him a favour—

“I say,” he said, looking not up but down, “give a chap a chance, will you, what’ll try to do ’is best?”

That seemed quite satisfactory, and with a sense of relief he turned to cogitation. The old lady (for so in his mind he designated Mrs. Tickle, whose age was

forty-eight) was well-disposed, but in spite of outward appearances not well-to-do, for Mr. Long, who should be a good judge of poverty, had been confirmed in his statement by Maud Annie, who was in a position to know. The ham had seemed to indicate opulence, but after all it had been a very small piece—Sam's father would have eaten it all and remained hungry—and it might have been a present. Sam knew where the bread had been carried, and he stole into the larder and looked about him. It was not well stocked, and he stole back and became even more thoughtful. It was all true that Maud Annie had said, and he felt half ashamed of the appetite that had robbed Mrs. Tickle of her supper.

He fingered the coppers in his pocket and devoted himself to mental arithmetic, in which subtraction occupied a prominent place. If he should decide to leave threepence in payment of food and lodging, would the other half of his capital suffice until he should be able to earn more? He decided that it would, or at any rate that it must, and wiped sums off his mental slate.

The Bible had not been replaced on the drawers, but lay on the table with Mrs. Tickle's spectacle case between the leaves, and the paper that Constable Smith had given him was there too, for he could see its projecting end. There had been nothing in Sam's ethical code to prevent him from reading the note on his way to Brick Row. He now read it again :—

“DEAR MRS. T.—The lad seems right enough, but you never can tell. Ask him questions and see if he's worth helping.

“FRANK SMITH.”

The miniature cliff of coal had tumbled into the embers below, and having broken into half-a-dozen pieces had produced a merry flame. Sam was very comfortable, and he replaced the paper with a grin, and was about to close the book when his eyes caught these words which had been lined round in pencil—

“Trust in the Lord and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.”

Sam read no more, but began to wonder if he had stumbled upon Mrs. Tickle’s motto, and from this his thoughts flowed into another channel. The flames had died down and the red embers had become grey before he reached his conclusion and went over to the couch.

“Jiminy!” he said, when he had wrapped himself up according to instructions and settled his head upon the improvised pillow; “I’ve got it. I won’t spend that sixpence, blowed if I will. That sixpence belongs to the old lady, but I’ll turn it over for ’er; I’ll make money for ’er, sure as my name’s Sam Munday.”

He felt aglow with good resolution and dwelt rather tenderly upon the thought of Mrs. Tickle. He wished he had had a mother of that kind: he wished Mrs. Tickle had been his mother. He was not sentimental, however—how should he be with his upbringing?—and he came to a practical conclusion.

“I’ll adopt ’er,” he said. “She isn’t my mother, but I’ll adopt ’er”; and with this generous and virtuous decision upon his tongue and filling his thoughts he closed his eyes and in five minutes was asleep.

Matthew and his fellow-evangelists must have had him in their charge, for Sam slept until cock-crow, but it was not cock-crowing that awoke him. That simple and inexpensive summons was unknown in the

Brickfields area, where chanticleer would have found himself in a hopeless environment. Just as there were no bricks, so also there were no fields. Some of the houses on the fringe of the district had what were called gardens by courtesy, though not even a blade of grass had the temerity to shew itself there, and (except on wash-days, when it served a useful purpose for a few hours in fine weather) the ground was given up to children and cats. The only open spaces large enough to accommodate fowls were the railed-off recreation grounds provided by the Corporation for the grubby youth of the neighbourhood, and these were the abomination of desolation in their black ugliness.

Instead of the cocks, then, there was a succession of blasts from the syrens of a hundred factories—the “whews” or “buzzers” as they were variously called—some shrill and piercing; others deep and sonorous; some dying away in wails only to revive again for further deaths; others maintaining a steady but deepening monotone. Simultaneously there was the sound of someone jumping out of bed in the room overhead and Sam slipped off his wrappings, drew on his boots and wondered where his cap had been put.

It was dark and he dare not strike a light, though he knew the matches were on the mantelpiece, and he was eager to be off. Groping his way to the pegs behind the door he found what he sought, and was about to draw back the bolt when a thought struck him, and he felt his way to the table and the closed Bible. Somewhere in his waistcoat pocket he knew there was the stump of a pencil, and having found it and withdrawn the slip of paper he carried both to the broad window ledge and raised one corner of the blind. There was now light enough for him to see what he

was doing, and he turned the paper over and wrote—

“DEAR MRS. TICKLE—Much obliged. Will see you again when I’ve got a job.

“SAM MUNDAY.”

This done he replaced the paper face upwards on the Bible, weighting it with the spectacle case; unbarred the door with the skill of a past master in the art of stealth, and went out to seek his fortune.

It was nearly ten o’clock before he found the beginning of the trail, and by that time Mrs. Tickle had become accustomed to the surprise Maud Annie’s discovery of the note had occasioned her. That young lady, coming downstairs to get a drink of tea before she went forth to her work at the mill, had seen at once that the bird had flown (a gaol-bird, as she quickly surmised), and had given loud voice to her suspicions. Nothing was missing, however, and Mrs. Tickle’s faith in human nature emerged triumphant from the trial. As to Sam—Mrs. Tickle dismissed him from her thoughts with the observation that she might see him again or she might not.

And now behold that youth, hungry but resolute, outside the “Sun Inn” in the main street of the city, wondering if he will be reduced to the necessity of borrowing a little of Mrs. Tickle’s money, of which he was the self-constituted honorary treasurer, for the purpose of satisfying the immediate cravings of nature. He had resisted the temptation for more than three hours, and he still did so, but with a will that weakened as his appetite grew more clamorous.

A light motor-van was standing at the door of the inn, and an inscription in gilt informed the public that it was the property of Caleb Knox, whose address was

the World's Toy Emporium, top of Southgate. There was the concluding announcement: "We defy competition."

Sam stopped and pondered. He had been in the toy trade in the neighbouring city until a divergence of views between his master and himself in regard to the time necessary for the delivery of a parcel had led to his dismissal. Sam tried to determine whether or no six months' experience as errand lad and everybody's "mug" would warrant him in applying for a job as a toy expert.

The chauffeur was standing with his back to the van smoking a cigarette and indulging in a scowl that turned his face into a thunderstorm. A faint-hearted boy would have taken warning and passed on, but the seat of Sam's faintness at that moment was not in his heart, and he accosted the man without misgiving.

"I say, mister, are they wanting a lad at your place?"

The man looked him up and down as if he was trying to form an estimate of his height and weight, and then said surlily:

"I ain't a registry office," and fixed his eyes on the upper windows of the building opposite.

Sam looked at him pleasantly.

"You've dropped something," he said, in the tone of one who was giving friendly information.

The man's eyes descended and searched the pavement.

"What have I dropped?" he inquired.

"Your manners," Sam answered, taking a step or two backwards as a precautionary movement.

At that instant an elderly man appeared at the door of the inn, chatting volubly with a woman whose print

dress and white apron in conjunction with her generous proportions conveyed an unmistakable impression of the kitchen.

Her companion was evidently not the landlord, for he was shaking hands with her and undertaking to convey sundry messages of an affectionate character to somebody called Daisy, and as the chauffeur started the engine at that moment a duller-witted lad than Sam might have concluded that the newcomer was Mr. Knox.

The proprietor of the World's Emporium had by this time noticed that the boy was evidently wanting to speak to him, and he smiled encouragingly. He was a man of middle size, sturdily built, plainly dressed, with a very red face and short side whiskers that had once been red also, but were now frosted by advancing years. He laughed a good deal, Sam noticed, and seemed a jolly, approachable sort of man, who spoke plainly with a good Yorkshire accent in a voice that he took no pains to hush.

"Now, my lad," he said, without leaving the step of the inn, "I don't owe you aught, do I, makes you be waiting same as a bum-bailiff with a writ in his pocket?"

"No, sir," replied Sam, who was chafing his cold hands as much from anxiety as from a sense of physical discomfort. "I'm wanting a job, sir; I've been in t' toy trade."

Mr. Knox laughed and the woman laughed.

"You look as if you're wanting a breakfast," the former said. "How long is it since you had it?"

Sam's pinched face no doubt confirmed the truth of the answer this direct question produced, and Mr. Knox turned to his companion.

"I saw you'd a rasher or two of bacon left, Jane," he said. "Let the lad have 'em with a thick slice of bread and a mug of coffee. Here"—he drew a coin from his pocket and put it in the woman's hand—"take him into your kitchen and let him warm himself a bit, and then send him up to the shop and we'll see if there's aught he can do."

He shook hands again, and having climbed up to the side of the surly chauffeur was speedily whisked away.

Sam followed his conductress into the kitchen and came out twenty minutes later refreshed in body and mind. There was no question that his star was in the ascendant: there was no question that the policy of taking no anxious thought for the morrow was attended with the happiest results. He inquired his way to Southgate and walked there with the light step of the favourite of fortune whose future is assured, but his heart sank a good deal when he stood in Mr. Knox's office and that gentleman applied the probe to his past career.

"Well, I don't know, lad"—Mr. Knox's voice was doubtful, and he passed his hand over his hair, which was artfully arranged to conceal an increasing baldness—"I could do with a man to drive the van, for I'm finishing with that pleasant-faced chap you saw, and I could do with a girl in the dolls' hospital, but I don't just see where I can fit a lad in. Suppose you try somewhere else and come back again if you find naught."

"I could soon learn to drive t' van, sir," said Sam, who felt in his heart that he would never meet with anything so good as this. "I'm sharp at picking things up, and I'll do my best if you'll give me a

chance. I've been awful lucky so far, an' you won't find no man 'at'll do no better for you nor what I will."

Mr. Knox would have found a great difficulty in parsing this sentence, but he was no grammarian himself and not in the least critical of Sam's language, whilst on the other hand he was considerably influenced by Sam's sincerity.

"Then you think you can manage to be a good lad, and you'll do your level best if I give you a chance?" he asked, and Sam replied:

"Yessir; honest I will."

"And how are you going to go on till you draw a bit of wage?" continued Mr. Knox, "and where are you going to live?"

"I'll manage right enough," said the optimist, who dealt with problems only as they arose.

Mr. Knox laughed.

"You've got spirit, anyway," he said. "Come on upstairs."

He led the boy to a large, well-lighted room where a number of women and girls were performing operations on dolls of all sizes and conditions, and summoned Miss Wilks.

The matron of the hospital conferred aside with the proprietor for a while and then called a younger woman to the council. Finally all three came up to Sam.

"Miss Mellor 'll put you up for a bit till you've time to turn round," said Mr. Knox. "This is her. You can go home with her at six o'clock. He'll carry his own trunk, Miss Mellor," he added facetiously.

A wan smile appeared on Miss Mellor's pretty but weary-looking face and vanished immediately as if afraid of being seen, and Mr. Knox led Sam away. All the rest of the day he was employed on odd jobs

under the supervision of Mr. Bert Lycester, Mr. Knox's manager, who had a reputation for not allowing flies to settle on the men, and when six o'clock came Mr. Knox gave him five shillings on account and promised him a parcel of cast-off underclothing. Sam walked by the side of the forlorn Miss Mellor with the air of a drum-major.

"Shall we be going near t' Brickfields?" he asked.

"Brickfields? Why we pass it," said Miss Mellor.

When they came to Rose Street Sam saw a grocer's shop at the corner opposite the public-house.

"Do you mind waiting a minute?" he asked, and when Miss Mellor had no objection he went into the shop and paid for a rasher of ham.

"Can you send it?" he asked.

"If it isn't far I can," said the woman, smiling at the lad's eager face.

Sam tore off (by permission) a strip of the white paper in which the ham was being wrapped and sought his pencil.

"Got a job. Will look in before long," he wrote and signed his name. Then he put the paper on top of his purchase.

"Where has it to go to?" the woman asked.

"Seven, Brick Row," he replied.

CHAPTER III

WE MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF SOME RESIDENTS IN THE BRICKFIELDS.

IF suburban districts have their good, better and best, slum areas have similarly their bad, worse and worst. It was so in the Brickfields, and Mrs. Tickle was old enough to remember the time when Brick Row was at the top of the descending scale and was looked upon as the west end of slumdom. That enviable position was now held by newer streets, such as Cowslip Place, where the trodden wastes were found that their owners referred to as gardens, and Brick Row had sunk to the second category. After that came Rose Street, but there were lower depths still. Rose Street was a thoroughfare, and its wretched dwellings were exposed more or less to the public gaze; and it was also a community, where a limited freemasonry existed, and a man (and more particularly a woman) was interested in his neighbours. The abysmal depths were the blind alleys and courts that slunk away from the better known streets, where poverty and shame hid themselves successfully; where human derelicts mouldered in cellars and rotted in attics and were forgotten by all except the landlord's agent and one or two hard-working parsons and heroic district nurses. Compared with these, Brick Row was almost aristocratic.

There were degrees and gradations, too, in the Row itself. The unfortunates who lived in the houses at the back of the Row, which were reached by way of the tunnels that pierced the buildings on both sides at regular intervals were not on an equal footing with their neighbours who faced the street. His Majesty's post office might treat them all alike, but the Row knew that these unhappy mortals were for the most part on the incline that ended in the blind alley.

Then there were the shopkeepers and professionals. Alma Roberts, who must have had a stock of haberdashery that could hardly have cost less than five pounds, and who eked out her subsistence by knitting and re-footing stockings, shared with Serenna Grange, of the sweet and cake shop, the distinction of appearing in the local directory under a classified heading; and as old residents who paid their way and their rent were held in respect. The same could hardly be said of the professionals, for Mr. William Smith, the chimney-sweep, better known as "Sooty Bill," was by common consent no gentleman. The treatment he meted out to his wife and children when he was at his worst was a scandal in a neighbourhood that was not easily scandalized, but Brick Row could forgive much and close its eyes to more, and as Sooty had a ready wit and a sense of humour it contented itself with disliking the man and was not really hostile.

"Punch" Lister, his next-door neighbour, was poor but proud, and the pride and the poverty were chronic conditions. To see "Punch" in a garden in suburbia, and especially to see him in a schoolroom when an "At Home" was in progress, was to receive an entirely false impression of that gentleman's circumstances. One could not be expected to know that the suit worn

on those occasions was the property of the middleman who came between Punch and the public. When the proprietor was in his own barely-furnished home he cut a very different figure, and the gay little theatre and its brightly-clothed dolls contrasted only too strongly with their dingy surroundings. Yet after all Punch was a "somebody" where the bulk of the people were nobodies.

There were no women of Lady Peggy's profession in the Row, but it was not because public opinion was too strong for them—it was, one might say, purely accidental. Lady Peggy, with her light laugh and devil-may-care manner, was rather popular than otherwise, but if she was a thorn in anybody's side it was Rose Street, appropriately enough, that was responsible, and not Brick Row.

Paramount over all the residents, tradesmen or professionals, was Sarah Tickle. She was more than a prominence, she was a force; not because she was better off than some of the others, but because she was better. Her speech was better than theirs; so was her wit, her wisdom, her resource, her character. She had lived all her life in the Brickfields and all the married portion of it in Brick Row. Other and lesser folk might be known by their names—sometimes by their Christian names, sometimes by their patronymics, sometimes by a nickname—but Mrs. Tickle shared with convicts the distinction of being known by a number.

"Run as 'ard as you can an' fetch Number Seven!" Every child in Brick Row—every youth and maiden who had been a child there—was familiar with that behest; and when the formula was begun the messenger was usually well on his way before it had been completed.

For in spite of its comparatively proud position Brick Row was not an abode of peace. It resembled a rookery much more closely than a dovecote, and there was ample justification for the calls on Mrs. Tickle's help and sympathy. Excitements, indeed, were so common in the Brickfields as to be comparatively unexciting. The proprietor of the Picture Palace had soon found that out, and the gaudily-coloured bills that leaned against the Corinthian pillars of his hall were invariably indicative of the highly-spiced fare provided for connoisseurs in thrills. The residents in Suburbia, not much more than a mile away, would have flocked to their doors or put on the chains and shivered in their rooms if the blood-curdling sounds that attracted no attention in the Brickfields had been introduced to their locality.

The fact is, women and children cried out before they were hurt because experience had taught them that when they *were* hurt the injury was usually so complete that they were unable to cry out at all. That being so, their neighbours were in the habit of shrugging their shoulders and hoping for the best; congratulating themselves, perhaps, that it was not their turn this time, but not wasting sympathy before they were quite sure that it was needed.

Consequently when a piercing shriek from No. 8 across the way rent the evening air Mrs. Tickle contented herself with remarking that "Louisa'll 'urt 'erself one o' these days if she carries on like that," and Thomas Tickle, whose age was thirteen, never even raised his eyes from the book on which they were glued. Maud Annie, who was experimenting with a new arrangement of her hair and debating with herself whether she would go to the pictures or stay indoors

and cut out a blouse from a pattern that had been given with that week's *Lady's Journal*, did not think it necessary to remove the hairpins from her mouth to make any comment. Only Cissie's eyes grew wide with fear and shone like stars in a very pale sky, and her hands grasped the arms of the tall chair very tightly, for the child was nervous and delicate, and had been a frail, pinched little specimen of humanity all the twelve years of her life.

Another shriek louder than before caused the child to start violently, and her mother noticed her, but before she could speak the door was thrown open and a young woman entered, throwing her head from side to side and clasping her hands spasmodically. Hysterical sobs and groans rendered her almost speechless, but she managed to gasp out that the baby had got an open safety pin in its throat and would be dead in a minute.

Mrs. Tickle waited to hear no more but pushed the girl aside and ran across the road. Maud Annie, hastily completing the business in hand, looked through the window and saw her mother speeding down the street with a bundle in her arms at a pace that those who knew the lady only by her bulk would have considered incredible.

Louisa was a favourite in the Brickfields. Some time before she had been too riskily fond of one of her admirers with the result that her mother (with whom she lived) had found herself a grandparent without having the responsibility that attaches to a mother-in-law. Maud Annie turned to the girl, who was only a few years older than herself, and who was leaning over the table with her head buried in her arms, groaning with the usual Brickfields lack of restraint.

Maud Annie was not callous, but neither was she gushing. She had known no other home than this, and had come to the conclusion that eighteen years of the odours and experiences of that grimy district, was as long as such flesh and blood as hers ought to be expected to stand. She had thriven well enough in that poor soil, it is true, and had so far failed to convince her mother that the time had come when she might be bedded out in a more open and healthy locality.

"How did he do it?" she inquired; and as the girl took no notice of the question she continued firmly—

"You'll do yourself no good by carrying on i' that way, Louisa. Mother's off with t' baby somewhere, and it'll be all right, you'll see. Whatever were you doing to let him get hold of t' safety-pin?"

Louisa dried her tears. If Mrs. Tickle had got her baby in charge and taken it somewhere there was still hope. Mrs. Tickle was a woman of resource—a very present help in time of trouble. Besides, she could always begin groaning again if things went wrong.

"I 'ad 'im laid o' my knee, gettin' 'im ready for bed," she explained, "an' 'e must ha' put 'is little 'and out an' picked t' pin up off o' t' table. Mother saw it in it' mouth but it wor too late then."

"Well," remarked Maud Annie complacently, "babies take a deal of killing. They've as many lives as cats in this neighbourhood. If it was some rich woman's child I daresay it would be dead by now, but they always live where they could be well spared."

Louisa was a passionate girl, and she jumped up with face aflame. She had good features and was almost pretty, and she held herself with a kind of

natural dignity that added weight to the words that poured hotly from her lips.

"Spared! I'll let you know, Maud Annie Tickle, 'at mine can't be spared no more nor t' grandest lady's i' t' land. You're a 'ard-'earted dev——"

She caught sight at that moment of Cissie's terrified face, and her flash of anger ended with the suddenness of an exploded squib. She went over to the child, flung herself down upon the rug, and burying her head in Cissie's lap began to cry. There were no groans this time, but the girl's shoulders heaved with the intensity of her emotion, and Cissie stroked her hair and looked troubled.

Thomas had been sitting back in his chair, a would-be impartial spectator with a bias in favour of his sister, but few males can remain unaffected by a melodramatic situation, and the effect produced by Maud Annie's hard words swung him round to the side of Louisa.

"See what you've done, you softhead," he exclaimed with brotherly candour; and as he felt unequal to the exigency and uncomfortable in the presence of so many tears he cut the difficulty by picking up his cap and going out.

Maud Annie was not, I repeat, stony-hearted, but she was young and less experienced than her mother, though she found it hard to realise the latter fact. She was not without common-sense, however, and she patched up a speedy peace by assuring Louisa that she had taken her words "the wrong way." Louisa dried her tears and speculated uneasily on Mrs. Tickle's continued absence.

At length half-a-dozen children rushed in unceremoniously to announce that Mrs. Tickle was

coming up the street bringing the baby with her, and Louisa jumped up and ran to meet her. Maud Annie shrugged her shoulders and opened the drawer where she kept her scissors. Her choice was made—she had had pictures enough for one night.

When Mrs. Tickle came in a few minutes later Louisa's mother accompanied her. Her name was Margerison, which Brick Row found unpronounceable, so she became "Louisa's mother" to everybody.

"Nay, I niver knew nob'dy like her mother, Maud Annie," she exclaimed as she seated herself heavily in the arm-chair that Cissie vacated. "She frames while other fowk frets. She 'ad 'im at t' infirmary afore I'd gathered my wits together. I niver thowt abaht t' infirmary for all it's only in t' next street as you may say. I don't know what we should do baht 'er."

Maud Annie tossed her head and closed her lips. Soft soap of that kind had no influence on her, and if she had been allowed to have her way the Brickfields would have been thrown on its own resources at the earliest possible moment. Cissie, however, was anxious for information.

"Have they got it out, mother?" she asked wistfully.

"To be sure they 'ave, love," replied Mrs. Tickle, "but t' nurse 'ad to get t' doctor to do it, and it gave 'im a bit o' bother. It was a mercy t' point was up t' 'ill."

"Well, I wish 'im no 'arm," commented Louisa's mother, "but I don't know 'at there'd be owt to worry abaht if 'e wor to go, so long as 'e went peaceful. I shouldn't like to think of 'im goin' wi' a safety-pin, but 'e came where 'e wasn't wanted, an' it's another mouth to fill."

Maud Annie's expression shewed that she was of the same opinion, but she kept her lips tightly closed.

"I'd be ashamed o' such thoughts," said Mrs. Tickle. "It came where it wasn't wanted, right enough, poor little thing, but if it was to be ta'en it 'ud leave Louisa that much poorer."

Maud Annie looked up defiantly.

"It 'ud leave her that much better off, I should say. It'll stand in her way if she wants a husband, and the baby would be better off, wouldn't it? It won't have much of a chance in t' Brickfields."

Mrs. Tickle could be sharp-tongued, but she was not of those mothers who snap at their children and close their mouths by authority. She had always spoken freely with them, and she had not thought it necessary to leave it to chance or to other people to enlighten Maud Annie in regard to the realities of life and the pitfalls into which young women might stray. Maud Annie was fore-armed because her mother had fore-warned her.

"You know naught about what chance 'e'll 'ave," she replied. "For aught any of us knows Louisa'll live to be glad 'at she reared 'im. I'm none saying, mind you, 'at it isn't 'ard for you both."

"Well, she'll 'ave to 'ug 'er own load, will t' lass," said Louisa's mother, rising.

"Love makes light o' loads," said Mrs. Tickle. "There's some loads folks are glad to carry; and anyway we've been given strong backs o' purpose for carrying 'em."

"That's one way o' lookin' at it," said Louisa's mother, "and as I say to t' lass there's allus t' work'us to fall back on."

"Work'ouse!" ejaculated Mrs. Tickle. "You

ought to be ashamed o' yourself! When you 'aven't room for 'im at your 'ouse you can send t' little chap across 'ere. I'll none show 'im t' door."

"Mother," said Maud Annie, when their neighbour had retired laughing, "you want to be careful what you say. You'll be surprised if somebody takes you at your word one o' these days. It's hard enough making ends meet as it is."

"We've made 'em both meet and tie so far," said her mother firmly, "and I meant every word I said. If I'm ta'en at my word it won't trouble me. You never lose naught by doing a kindness."

"Nothing ever does trouble you," grumbled Maud Annie.

A loud knock at the door interrupted the conversation, which was not renewed, as the visitor was Sam Munday. Mrs. Tickle uttered an exclamation of gratified surprise.

"Well, if it isn't that lad!" she said.

Sam came in and took the polished chair, which he regarded almost reverentially. He had hoped that Maud Annie might not be indoors, and her company and that of the younger child embarrassed him. Cissie was getting ready for bed, and she eyed the boy with a timid interest of which he was conscious, but the warmth of Mrs. Tickle's welcome put him at his ease.

"We've been expecting you ever so long, 'aven't we, Maud Annie?" she said.

Maud Annie replied "Em-m," which was an abstracted affirmative, and bent her brows over the problem of how to cut a sixteen-inch pattern out of fifteen inches of material. Sam was distinctly relieved

at this evidence of preoccupation, and his face reflected the pleasure upon Mrs. Tickle's.

"You oughtn't to 'ave sent the 'am," she went on; "though it's not much use saying that when we put it out o' sight t' same night and enjoyed it rarely. You must thank Sam, Cissie, love, because you liked it, didn't you?"

Cissie nodded. She was standing shyly at her mother's side like a much younger child, and Sam noted her pale face and hollow cheeks and drew his own conclusions. He was himself in boisterous health and the best of spirits, and he felt inches taller and broader than when he had sat on the same chair seven days before. He was tasting the fruit of virtue and he found it good. He was possessed with the sense of contemplated philanthropy, and that was even better. He had had no idea that Mrs. Tickle's family extended beyond the formidable Maud Annie, and it suddenly occurred to him that there might even be a Mr. Tickle somewhere, and younger children than Cissie tucked away upstairs, and the thought troubled him. He realised that in that case he might easily be a supernumerary.

Thomas came in before the narrative that Mrs. Tickle called for had proceeded far, and the two younger children got their bread and milk and went off to bed before it could be continued. Then Mrs. Tickle brought out her knitting and Sam took the other arm-chair and told his tale.

It was interesting enough, but Sam left it incomplete. He said nothing, for instance, about the sixpence that was to be invested for the benefit of his adopted mother; he gave no hint of that proposed relationship. His brain was full of it, and if he had

chanced to fall into a fever and reveal his mind in delirium, instead of babbling o' green fields he would almost certainly have babbled o' the impracticable schemes he had been concocting and rejecting for a week past. Neither did he say anything of his experiences in the house where he was a lodger except that he was "all right" there. He had half intended to do so, but Maud Annie stood in the way. He was afraid of her, and she was too young and too modern and too sharp with her tongue for him to venture on sharing confidences with her.

"Then you're getting on fine?" said Mrs. Tickle admiringly when the narrative ended.

"Champ!" replied Sam. "Even old Blister is satisfied. That isn't t' boss—it's t' boss's boss; t' manager, you know. They call 'im Lister, but he spells it—blowed if I can remember 'ow 'e spells it."

He felt in his pocket, found a scrap of paper there, and having produced it spelled the word "L-y-c-e-s-t-e-r."

"Rum way o' spelling Lister," he commented; "and his other name's Bertram.—B. Lister : that's 'ow I get Blister, and it suits 'im down to t' ground, 'cos he raises spots on you, an' you never forget e's there. Most folks think he belongs to t' shop 'cos he talks grammar an' puts airs on. But give me Mr. Knox : 'e's the man for my money."

"P'raps that's because he doesn't give you as many knocks as the other chap," suggested Maud Annie humorously, and the remark pleased Sam above its merits. He laughed until he choked, and then Maud Annie laughed and all three laughed together. Sam felt happier than he had ever done in his life before,

now that it had become evident that Maud Annie could thaw.

When Mrs. Tickle began preparations for supper Sam rose, and no persuasion could induce him to remain. He went down the street whistling merrily and with a bounding joy at his heart. The visit had been a triumphant success—Cissie had kissed him when she went to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

SAM PUZZLES HIS MASTER, AND GERTIE PUZZLES SAM.

SAM MUNDAY stood in his employer's office with the kind of look upon his face that small boys would wear if their teacher should have been floored with one of his own mathematical problems. In Sam's case there was more than the thrill of joy, the humour and satisfaction that such a piquant situation was calculated to produce: there was the added sense of triumph such as a boy might experience who himself knew the answer and was prepared to furnish it in due time. Such moments of jubilation are rare, and are not to be cut short from an undue eagerness to reach the climax.

Mr. Knox and Mr. Lycester had their heads together literally as well as metaphorically. They, too, were standing, and taking no notice of Sam, for their attention was absorbed by two pieces of twisted wire that the older man held in his fingers and was endeavouring to disconnect.

"Let me try," said Mr. Lycester, holding out his hand for the fiftieth time.

"Half a mo'," replied Mr. Knox, whose face was becoming redder and redder. "You've had two shots and didn't do any better than me. It beats all, this does."

Sam stifled a chuckle. It was the best bit of pie he

had eaten for a long time, and the fun of it was he was enjoying himself in working hours that were to be paid for.

Mr. Lycester frowned and bent forward until his nose nearly touched the wire, and again his hand went out involuntarily towards it. Mr. Knox relinquished the toy and wiped his forehead; then looked at Sam and winked as he saw that his subordinate was as much at sea as ever. It was the great weakness of the proprietor of the Emporium, in Mr. Lycester's opinion, that he could not maintain an attitude of ease with dignity in his dealings with his employés.

"You'll have to give it up, Bert, same as me," said Mr. Knox, after a few minutes vain endeavour; but this the manager was loth to do.

"Do it again, Sam," he said. His tone was peremptory, and he shoved the toy roughly into the boy's hand, but Sam's composure was not disturbed. The gleam in his eyes brightened a little as he put his hands behind his back and immediately produced the dismembered parts for inspection.

Mr. Knox laughed, but Mr. Lycester was visibly annoyed, and a grin spread over Sam's face as he watched the manager's frantic efforts and saw that he was becoming angry.

"Show us how you do it," said Mr. Knox by-and-by, and Sam took the puzzle and slowly untwisted it before their eyes. It was so simple that a baby could have done it with its eyes shut once it knew how, and Mr. Lycester said "Oh, I see," in a tone that was a mixture of vexation and disgust, and Mr. Knox said nothing but picked up the puzzle and began playing with it abstractedly. He was doing sums in his head

and approaching one of those rapid decisions that had helped to make him a minor king in the toy trade.

"You're sure it's your own?" he inquired, looking hard at Sam. "You aren't playing any tricks?" and Mr. Lycester added unnecessarily: "What we want to know is if it is entirely your own invention."

Sam looked straight at Mr. Knox.

"There's nob'dy ever seen it but me before I shewed you it, sir," he replied.

Mr. Knox and Mr. Lycester turned their backs upon the young inventor and conferred together over the high desk. They were evidently not quite in agreement, and by-and-by Mr. Knox said: "Well, don't bother to stop any longer, Bert. I'll fix it up," and the manager retired.

When he had gone Mr. Knox climbed on to the stool and crooked his legs round its supports. Sam stood with his hands behind his back and wondered what was going to happen.

"I'll buy that patent of you, Sam," said his master, "if you aren't too heavy in your price. What 'ud you think it was worth?"

"A^cshilling," Sam replied promptly, and Mr. Knox's eyes twinkled.

"I like a chap that knows his own mind," he said. "That's how I made my way, Sam, but take my tip and never begin on a low figure. Some folks would say 'done,' and you'd *be* done. Now between you and me and the post I should say five pounds."

All the grin went out of Sam's face. His brain reeled and he put his hands in his trousers pockets to steady himself—or perhaps it was a sub-conscious movement to ascertain if they were capable of accommodating such a fortune. He said nothing.

Words, usually his ready servants, failed him in the hour of his prosperity. Mr. Knox noticed his embarrassment and was not displeased.

"Lots of men in my position would call me a fool," he continued. "I daresay some who work for me would, but I've always gone on the straight and square, Sam. That's because I'd a mother who started me right. You'd have been content with a shilling, but I won't rob you. That puzzle 'll sell like hot cakes. Now will you leave yourself in my hands?"

"Yessir," Sam replied with emphasis.

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do," said Mr. Knox. "I'll give you a pound down and I'll pay you a royalty on all that are sold—so much in the pound, you understand. We shall have to see how it works out, but I'll do right by you, and I couldn't say better if you were the keenest business man in Yorkshire. Will that suit you?"

"Yessir," said Sam. He was struggling with a variety of thoughts that refused to arrange themselves in sentences, and he stammered something that his employer could not catch.

"Take your time," said Mr. Knox, "and say what's on your mind."

"Please, sir," Sam jerked out, "it only cost me sixpence, an' there was them shirts an' things——"

Mr. Knox laughed and stopped him.

"This is business, Sam, this is. I'm going to make a lot of money out of you—heaps more than you'll make; so say no more about it. Is there aught else?"

"Yessir, please, sir," said Sam in some confusion. "That sixpence belonged to Mrs. Tickle, an' I could like t' money to be put down to 'er."

"It belonged to Mrs. Tickle?" repeated Mr. Knox.
"And who on earth is Mrs. Tickle?"

"Please, sir, 7, Brick Row," replied Sam; but as the answer shed no light upon the situation Mr. Knox encouraged the boy to tell him more, and was soon in possession of the whole story.

The proprietor of the Emporium was a man with an emotional heart, and it warmed to the youth who stood awkwardly before him. His temperament enabled him to enter into the spirit of the proposal, and he encouraged Sam heartily.

"That's a good idea of yours," he said, "but I'll open an account for Mrs. Tickle and you in your joint names, d'you see? Because really I've nothing to do with Mrs. Tickle here. But the idea does you credit; and, I say, you'd better keep this from Mr. Lycester. If he asks you what arrangements we've made, tell him——"

Mr. Knox paused and knit his brows, and Sam saw his hesitation.

"Please, sir," he said when his employer appeared to find it difficult to continue, "please, sir, I won't tell 'im anything."

"All right," said his employer in a tone of relief. "I daresay you won't be fast."

Mr. Knox remained on the stool for a considerable time after Sam had gone, and was so deep in thought that he did not notice to what a dangerous angle he was tilting it until it almost overbalanced. Then he made a desperate clutch at the desk, and in doing so upset the red ink bottle and ruined one of his starched cuffs.

"Daisy'll play the deuce," he muttered as he wiped his hand with the duster and proceeded to pay a

similar attention to the desk. "Funny I should have been thinking about her just then. That tale of Sam's 'll take her fancy and perhaps get me out of trouble."

Meantime Sam had had the anticipated encounter with Mr. Lycester, and the reply he had made to that gentleman's inquiries had not been well received. In spite of his frock coat and veneered speech Mr. Lycester was only a churl, and he sought to get his own back by setting Sam to do certain disagreeable jobs that would ordinarily have waited for the dustman. The petty revenge was lost on Sam, however, for the boy had been doing disagreeable jobs all his life and did not know that they were disagreeable, but he saw that the manager was unfriendly and was quick-witted enough to realise that this attitude was the result of Mr. Knox's evident good-will. For Mr. Lycester's hostility Sam cared little. He did not like the man, and he did not trust him. He tried to tell Miss Mellor about it as they walked home that evening. Miss Mellor, it should be explained, had become "Gertie" by this time.

"He's a rotter, old Blister is," he grumbled. "He likes folks to think 'e's t' boss, an' 'e doesn't tell 'em no different. An' 'e's all soap an' 'oney to Mr. Knox's face, but 'e's like an old cat to 'is back. Thinks 'is blooming frock coat an' a flower in 'is button-ole turns 'im into a gentleman, same as if a fine shell makes a good oyster."

Gertie raised her chin a little, but made no reply, and Sam went gaily on:

"I'd trust that chap just as far as I could see 'im. He's a shifty look in 'is eyes 'at gives me the creeps; peep through a key-ole, 'e would, an' never think

naught of it. I wouldn't trust 'im wi' my pipe-scrappings, let alone wi' all yon business."

If Sam had not been so self-absorbed and extraordinarily elate he would have noticed that his companion's face was even whiter than usual and that her eyes were drawn as if with pain. He never looked at her, however, and had not remarked her silence.

"They say 'e's going to marry Miss Daisy," he went on, "an' get 'old o' t' business, but I 'ope 'e isn't. He's a wrong 'un, that's what 'e is, an' I'm capped the guv'ner can't see through 'im. But the shifty old beggar knows 'ow to play 'is cards. He's a sharper, if I know aught."

Gertie had quickened her pace, but Sam was strangely unobservant.

"Do t' girls like 'im, Gert.?" he asked, and she forced herself to reply in a tired, colourless voice :

"How should I know? I never mention his name to them."

"They're funny things, are girls," Sam continued loftily. "If they weren't, Miss Daisy 'ud see through 'im, but it's all top an' show wi' girls. I suppose it's because they know 'at t' best dolls 'ave t' best clothes on 'em, an' they think it's t' same wi' men. Jiminy! they're daft, are women, an' I'm glad I wasn't born one. I wonder 'ow many old Blister's been after before 'e set 'is trap for Miss Daisy."

A sharp exclamation from his companion, half of pain, half of vexation, startled him, and he pulled himself up, and for the first time saw the girl's face.

"What is it, Gert.?" he asked anxiously. "Are you poorly?"

She was biting her lip and holding her left hand to her side, and Sam saw that her lip was trembling.

"Come in 'ere," he said, "and 'ave a small brandy"—long experience had made him familiar with the universal remedy for all disorders, and public-houses were plentiful enough—but Gertie shook her head.

"It's naught," she said. "I'm not feeling so well, and I shall be right enough if you'll only hold your noise. You've rattled on till you've turned me dizzy."

Sam was penitent. He held his noise and gave rein to his thoughts instead. He wished Gertie and her sister would be a little more communicative. He had been with them six weeks now and had lived in an atmosphere that was always chilly. If he had not experienced the warmth and homeliness of No. 7, Brick Row he might have had less fault to find with his surroundings, but the contrast was too pronounced to escape notice.

It was not that the Mellors were poorer than Mrs. Tickle. Their house was quite as large as hers, and if anything better furnished. The neighbourhood, too, was on the outer fringe of slumdom and distinctly more select. The elder sister had work of some kind brought to her from the mill, and was seldom without employment, and Sam was told that Mr. Knox paid his girls generously, yet the lad felt that somehow all was not quite right with the women and particularly with Gertie. The air was heavy as well as cold: there were no plants or flowers in the house; and though the sisters treated him kindly he was never made to feel that he was anything more than a lodger. He was glad now when they got indoors, and in his concern for the girl he was about to tell the elder sister what had happened, but Gertie stopped him with a "That'll do."

Tea was not quite ready, and Sam slipped out and

bought a tin of lobster. He didn't believe for a moment that Gertie was poorly, and he judged it to be a good rule when anybody was in the dumps to relieve the spirits by tickling the palate. Besides, this was a red-letter day in Sam's history, and the incredible good fortune that had come to him ought to be celebrated. Salmon was a fairly common dish, but lobster was a delicacy that was reserved for a very occasional Sunday. He emptied the tin's contents into a dish and felt happier when he found the gift appreciated.

"You'll never have any money, Sam, at this rate," said Miss Mellor. "You don't want to be extravagant at your time of life. Lads ought to save their sixpences."

All the same she enjoyed the meal, and Sam was so pleased with his experiment that he decided to extend it.

"I've had a stroke o' luck to-day," he explained, "an' you might as well share it. What do you say if we go to t' pictures?"

They said No and repeated the negative several times, but with decreasing emphasis, and eventually Sam got his way and paid ninepence for two hours of thrills.

Unfortunately Miss Mellor developed a headache, a penalty she sometimes had to pay for this kind of flickering enjoyment, and she went supperless to bed as soon as they reached home. Gertie had brightened up a little during the Wild West and Charlie Chaplin parts of the entertainment, but a tragic love story, crammed with pathos and sickly sentiment and complicated by an element of crime in which the heroine almost came to grief, sent her spirits down to

zero again, and she was listless and heavy-eyed when she sat down for a few minutes after clearing the table. In Sam's bosom a feeling that was almost paternal struggled to the birth.

"You're fretting about something, Gert," he said. "Isn't there nob'dy you can splutter it out to? What you want to do is to get it off your chest."

An angry look came into the girl's eyes and her face began to redden.

"You want to mind your own business," she said fiercely, "and leave me to mind mine."

The flush of scarlet that accompanied the outburst made her appearance almost striking, and it occurred to Sam that she only lacked colour and animation to be quite attractive. He wished he could get behind the barrier of her reserve, but he did not know how. The clumsy attempt he had just made had done more harm than good: he had drawn a bow at a venture and only succeeded in wounding. His face betrayed his disappointment, and Gertie relented.

"You meant well, I daresay," she said grudgingly, "but if there was aught to tell there's nobody to tell it to, so don't ever say any more about it. Besides, there isn't anything. And don't go saying aught to Ellen or I'll never forgive you."

"I say," said Sam eagerly, "I've just thought what I'd do if I was you. 'Course I'll say naught about it to nob'dy—I'll take my Bible oath 'at I won't—but you go see Mrs. Tickle: she'll know what to do, I'll bet, and get it off your chest. Now just you think it over—No. 7, Brick Row."

Gertie turned a disgusted look on the boy, and, rising, locked the door and extinguished the light.

CHAPTER V

"AMBROSIA DAY" IN THE BRICKFIELDS.

IT was "Ambrosia Day" in Brick Row, and the good smell of baking bread passed through many an open door and window to mingle with the clean washed air of the narrow street. A heavy thunder shower had scrubbed the Yorkshire stones with which the street was paved, making them look like huge biscuits fresh from the bakehouse. There were hollows here and there where the rain remained to form miniature lakes, and in these toddling babies were cooling their feet or sailing rafts of chip and paper and getting very wet and happy in the process. The black clouds had gone and the woolpacks had been opened in the sky, so that in the strong reflected light Brick Row looked as attractive and as little like the inner rim of a slum as it could ever hope to do.

Towards noon Dr. Forsyth's old-fashioned phaeton turned the corner, and the equally old-fashioned coachman—a little man, in a shabby livery, with a skin and complexion like a shrivelled lemon, and a patience that might have made Job ashamed of himself—guided the easy-going mare past the indifferent water-babies and pulled up at the door of No. 7. Then as his master got out the man fixed his eyes on infinity and became a waxwork.

The doctor was an old man, slow and heavy, with

a thickly-bearded face and the look of a gentleman farmer rather than of a medical man who was entitled to put M.D. and eight or ten more letters after his name. He was something of an oddity, but a universal favourite in the Brickfields, which had no use for any other doctor; and he spoke with tongues—sometimes good English and sometimes good Yorkshire (which his patients preferred), but always with a Scotch accent; and he had no finical notions about prompt payment. In return for this his patients were not at all particular about new-fangled remedies and methods, and they let him apply leeches and blisters and mustard-plasters to his heart's content. When he added an occasional dose of rough language they loved him all the more, because they felt then that he understood the case, and they were sure they were getting something that wouldn't be charged for in the bill. He had almost certainly the poorest practice in the city, and he probably got more out of it in the way of appreciation and first-class enjoyment than fell to the lot of any of his professional brethren. If he had not had private means he would have starved, but he was so much attached to his Brickfields patients that it would have broken his heart to retire and leave them to the tender mercies of some young fellow just out of college, with his head full of germs and "cultures."

Baking operations were over at No. 7, and loaves, tea-cakes, and two immense oven-bottom cakes were ranged upon a clean white cloth on the dresser in all their glories of graduated brown. The doctor sniffed the air as he entered, and walking up to the cord that was stretched across the mantel-piece broke off a curling strip of crisp oatcake and began to munch it.

Then he turned to Maud Annie, who was seated in one of the arm-chairs with her right foot bandaged and supported on a stool.

“Hallo!” he said. “What on earth have you been doing?”

The girl flushed.

“I missed a step this morning, and I’ve twisted my ankle badly,” she said; and Mrs. Tickle explained what remedial measures had been taken.

The doctor knelt down on the rug and removed the wrappings.

“Umph!” he said. “Trod on something that wasn’t there, did you? This’ll keep you with your foot up for a week or more, my lady”; and he replaced the bandage with deft and skilful fingers. “There’s nothing I can teach your mother about sprains,” he added; “but keep it well up, and remember you haven’t to use it till I tell you. D’you hear?”

Tears of vexation came into Maud Annie’s eyes.

“That’s another week’s wages lost,” she said, “and just when Cissie’s taken bad again.”

“Aye,” said the doctor, rising and breaking off another piece of the oat-cake. “That’s how it is you see: ‘it never rains but it pours.’”

“I’d be ashamed to say aught o’ t’ sort,” said Mrs. Tickle sharply, “and I’m capped at you, doctor. It’s just one o’ them silly sayings ’at folks swallows like pills, and does ’em no good neither. I could ha’ understood it wi’ Maud Annie, ’cos she seems to ha’ been born wi’ a brick on her sperrits, but you ought to know better. There’d be as much sense i’ saying ’at you never cough but you choke. There’s no ’casion to look glum ’cos things go t’ wrong way now and then.”

The doctor winked at Maud Annie, but she was in no mood for pleasantries.

"Now and then!" she commented acidly.

"Yes, now and then," repeated her mother. "It isn't always raining; there's lots o' sunshiny days, and it's a sin and a shame to say there isn't. Come on upstairs, doctor."

The doctor was standing with his back to the fire, and he shewed no inclination to respond immediately to Mrs. Tickle's invitation.

"Right you are, Sarah," he said. "Your mother's a wonderful woman, Maud Annie, and keeps us all straight. She's not afraid o' storms, because she knows they clear the air and flush the sewers. Now let's have a look at Cissie."

He climbed the stairs slowly, and five minutes later came down again and half seated himself upon the table.

"I sometimes wonder if we're going to rear her," he said.

That was the innermost secret of his power and influence—"we." His patients' troubles were his troubles; their interests were his interests. There was not a dirty-faced child or a foul-mouthed father in the slum area to whom he did not link himself in time of trouble.

A shadow passed over Mrs. Tickle's face and her daughter's brow clouded again.

"I don't mean that there's any immediate danger," continued the doctor, "but I can't help wondering if she's ever going to be really well. The child wants what she can't get—she wants money spending on her: good nourishing support, dainties, something to tempt her appetite and build up her constitution—all

sorts of things you can't give her. She's never been right since she was born. I don't know why the devil you married a chap like Tickle.”

“Well, if I 'adn't, somebody else would,” replied Mrs. Tickle, “as I've told you many a 'underd times, for a man's only to toss 'is cap up and there's always more nor one ready to run to catch it. But looking back never 'elped nobody on t' road. It's my opinion 'at we shall rear t' little lass yet, and anyway we've got to put a good face on it and do our best, and we'll manage to get 'er some o' t' things if we can't get 'em all.”

“‘If wishes were horses beggars would ride.’ You can't pay for jellies and beef-tea with wishes,” grumbled Maud Annie. “However, we've got to make t' best of it, I suppose.”

“‘Ark to 'er!’” said Mrs. Tickle. “It's 'er turn now to trot out a saying wi' a jingle to it, and she'd try to make you think it was gospel. As for 'orses, there might be one ready saddled standing at t' side o' Maud Annie, but she'd 'ave 'er eyes in t' ditch and never see it. ‘We shall 'ave to make t' best of it,’ she said, and by t' sound of 'er you'd think she 'eard 'em bringing Cissie's coffin through t' doorway. Nay, Maud Annie, you want to 'ave a bit more sperrit. Them 'at makes t' best o' things doesn't look as lively as a funeral card.”

The doctor laughed and departed, and Mrs. Tickle spread the cloth for dinner.

“Mother,” said Maud Annie in the afternoon when her mother had leisure to sit down for a while, “what did t' doctor mean about father?”

“He meant,” replied Mrs. Tickle, after a moment's hesitation, in which she made up her mind to conceal

nothing—"he meant 'at I'd no business to marry your father 'cos 'e was an ailing man and not always as steady as 'e might ha' been, though 'e wasn't one o' t' worst by a long way. And p'rhaps I didn't ought to ha' done, 'cos I'm sure I didn't care for him as a woman ought to do before she weds a man; and I shouldn't ha' done but for your Aunt Polly."

Maud Annie's eyes opened widely.

"Aunt Polly?" she said. "Do you mean she persuaded you?"

Mrs. Tickle shook her head.

"He came to t' 'ouse a good bit, did your father, and it was easy to see 'e was after one of us, and I believe 'e didn't much care which, 'cos 'e thought your grandfather 'ad a bit o' money, but 'e favoured your Aunt Polly if aught. 'E'd a sort of a way wi' 'im 'at goes down wi' women. He talked better nor most, and sung a bit, and kept 'imself smart; and though your aunt never said naught to me, I thought she cared for 'im, 'cos she never would 'ear a word again' 'im. I used to lie awake at nights and fret about it, 'cos you see I'd reckoned 'im up, and though I didn't think much about 'im I thought the world of 'er, and I'd always 'ad to mother 'er, like, wi' 'er being delicate and no mother of wer own.

"I knew 'im and 'er 'ud never 'it it when t' gilt wore off, and I didn't want 'er to 'ave to rough it and sink under it, same as I knew she would. So at last I made up my mind and I wed 'im myself, and your aunt took it a bit 'ard at first, and she 'appen thinks what I've gone through serves me right for playing 'er a low trick, but she'll ha' thanked the Lord many a thousand times since 'at she missed 'im, and specially wi' such a 'usband as your Uncle Arthur "

Maud Annie tossed her head.

"Uncle Arthur's mean and nippy," she said. "I shouldn't call him any great catch."

"Well," conceded her mother, "'e isn't one to give over-weight if 'e knows it, but 'e's steady and respectable and 'e's made your Aunt Polly a good husband."

She gave a little sigh, and Maud Annie, who was not as unemotional as she pretended to be, turned to her mother with a softer look in her eyes.

"Was it pretty bad?" she asked.

Mrs. Tickle smiled.

"It might ha' been worse. There was times when I nearly laid 'ands on 'im, and would ha' done if it 'adn't been for what I promised when I wed 'im. You was only six when 'e died, for Cissie came after 'e was gone, and you won't remember much. I could get on wi' 'im when 'e wasn't i' drink, but when 'e was you'd ha' laughed if 'e 'adn't been your 'usband, 'e was that ridic'ulous—nasty and silly: I can't bide to think about it—and fit to snap your 'ead off. It's a funny thing but when men's always dry they're like t' ground—they go cracked."

"Did he strike you?" asked Maud Annie.

"We'll say naught about that," replied her mother. "'E was your father and 'e's dead and gone, and if only 'e's in a better place neither 'im nor me's no 'casion to grumble, but 'e was partic'lar bad to get on wi' before 'e died. Most times I 'ad 'im well i' hand, but—— Anyway, I've never rued keeping 'im out o' your Aunt Polly's way, and there's lots and lots in t' Brickfields 'at's worse nor 'im, and the Lord lets 'em go on living."

Maud Annie was silent.

"Mother," she said at length, "I wonder if there's many women like you?"

"There's thousands better, it's to be 'oped," said Mrs. Tickle, "or else t' world's in a poor way. I don't reckon to be one o' t' good 'uns, 'cos you see I could never make much out o' religion. And you don't know 'ow I feel sometimes, Maud Annie."

"I know how I feel," replied the girl. "I feel that I can't hold a candle to you, and never shall. Look how you've brought us up and all t' pains you take with us. If there's anybody better than you I've never seen 'em, and I shouldn't like to live with 'em."

"Eh, lass, 'ow you talk," said Mrs. Tickle.

They held a council of war when Thomas had had his tea. Thomas was a half-timer and worked at the same mill as his sister. He had small wages but a big appetite, and he had ambitions that required money for their development, and consequently threatened to keep his mother poor. All the same, the family would have got along nicely if Mrs. Tickle had been willing to turn a deaf ear to the cries of those who were needier than herself. This she could not do, for she was the repository of all her neighbours' difficulties, and familiarity with trouble had not taken the edge off her sympathy. This was the groundwork of Maud Annie's protests and complaints, and it constantly obtruded itself during the discussion on ways and means to provide Cissie with the essentials to recovery. They had not got beyond the unwelcome suggestion of the "three balls," or the still less acceptable alternative of an appeal to the other uncle, when Sam Munday knocked and admitted himself, and the question of Cissie's delicacies was shelved for the time.

Sam was in the best of spirits, for he had come through the first day of driving the motor-van unaided with flying colours and a clean sheet. He was no longer that amorphous being, a "lad": he was a man, and better still, a chauffeur, which was several steps up the ladder of manhood. He had come to No. 7 to expand in its genial atmosphere, and he did so with the grand air of a man who has a right to be on good terms with himself.

Sam's idea of celebrating a triumph was, as we have seen, the vulgar one of a banquet, and fish and chips for four (he was terribly crestfallen when he found it could not be five) seemed to him to hit the appropriate in the bull's eye. Mrs. Tickle, after a mental calculation of what tit-bits of other kinds could be bought at the price, cried shame on herself and consented to the expenditure of Sam's money. The restaurant was at hand—indeed there were three, but the one in Cross Street was understood not to use waste-oil for the frying medium, and so secured Sam's patronage—and by-and-by the company was gathered round the table and doing justice to Sam's bounty. Before the meal ended even Maud Annie had become cordial, and the rosy reflection of Sam's optimism had made her outlook less depressingly drab, but this frame of mind was destined to be short-lived. Even as the pots were being cleared away the Tempter was standing at the door hesitating to knock.

Thomas was removing his boots, and Sam was explaining to Maud Annie that the motor was of the convertible kind that could be made into a car for passengers, when the door was timidly opened and a woman entered. Daylight had almost spent itself and

the fire was burning red, so that at first the newcomer was not recognised.

"Eh, Marg'ret," said Mrs. Tickle. "I didn't know who it was. Come in, won't you?"

Maud Annie turned away her head with a gesture of despair. She knew what was coming.

"I'm here again, you see," said the woman in a hard, hopeless voice. She was standing just inside the inner doorway with her back against the framework, and she looked down at the ground as if conscious that she was unwelcome. Mrs. Tickle lit the gas and drew the blind, but the woman declined the invitation to be seated.

"Well, what is it, Marg'ret?" Mrs. Tickle asked sympathetically. "Do you want me to slip round wi' you, or 'ave you run short o' something?"

Sam's eyes were fixed upon the woman, who still looked down and toyed with one foot on the drugget. She was wretchedly dressed, and her dark hair hung untidily about her face, which was pale and sickly and seamed with care lines. Such faces had been common enough in the locality he had come from, but not such reticence.

"It's t' same old tale," said Margaret, "and your Maud Annie 'll be ready to curse me. We 'aven't a bite in t' 'ouse, and now 'e's off to pawn t' baby's rags for drink, and 'er cryin' till she can cry no more. I wish God 'ud strike 'im dead, if there is a God."

It ended with a sigh that was almost a groan, and Mrs. Tickle said:

"Nay, nay; don't say so. Say you wish 'e'd turn 'im t' other way round and make 'im into a good 'usband—that 'ud be more like. But now just bide a minute and I'll slip round wi' you."

She went into the larder and returned with a small basin of milk and half a loaf, and Maud Annie never looked round or took her eyes from the fire.

“I wouldn’t ha’ asked, Maud Annie,” said Margaret, as she turned to follow Mrs. Tickle, “if we ’adn’t been at t’ last gasp, a’most, but you can’t see t’ barn starve to death afore yer eyes”; and Maud Annie said: “No, that’s right enough,” in a voice as hard and hopeless as her neighbour’s.

“Go off to bed, Thomas,” she said when the woman had gone. “You have to be up in t’ morning, remember,” and Thomas went.

Sam felt uncomfortable, but Maud Annie’s reserve gave way when they were alone and she let herself go.

“It’s always alike,” she said. “We can’t put a penny by—it all goes on other folks, and here’s Cissie can’t have the things t’ doctor says she ought to have, but every drunken scamp’s children have to be helped whatever happens. If only we didn’t live in t’ Brickfields they wouldn’t always be on t’ door-step.”

Sam was quick enough in the uptake, and two thoughts sprang up and jostled each other for attention. The first related to Cissie and her needs, and he put that on one side to be dealt with later. The second was that he was himself a drunken scamp’s child who had been helped by Mrs. Tickle, and he must therefore not allow his sympathy for Maud Annie to bias him against her mother’s actions.

“I tell you what,” he said with sudden illumination, “how ’ud it be not to worry about it while you’ve slept on it? It’s wonderful ’ow things turn up. Look at me! When they chucked me out at ’ome I’d only fourpence i’ my pocket, and now——”

He paused. He was thinking contentedly of a page

in Mr. Knox's ledger inscribed with two names, but it was a secret that he must not breathe to Maude Annie, so he continued—

“I've got a good job an' likely to keep it, an' all along o' what your mother did for me. You keep your 'eart up, Maud Annie, an' we'll see what can be done.”

He concluded on a man's note, and Maud Annie, remembering the supper they had had, and that one at least of her mother's philanthropic seeds had fallen into good ground and was producing fruit, had nothing to say, but she found it impossible to be cheerful. Then Mrs. Tickle returned.

Sam saw that she was troubled, but she finished washing up before she said anything. Then she took her knitting out of the drawer and sat down by the fire.

“It goes to your 'eart to see t' little thing,” she said. “I'm sure we may be thankful 'at we can 'elp 'em a bit. We 'aven't much——”

“That's true, anyway,” said Maud Annie, pointedly.

“We've more nor t' woman 'ad when t' prophet asked for t' little cake,” replied Mrs. Tickle, brightening at the recollection. “We've more nor a 'andful o' meal in t' barrel, and all t' baking done. And if you'd seen t' baby——”

Maud Annie interrupted her.

“I wouldn't let 'em pine no more than you would, mother. But why don't you let us get out of here? There's no end to it, and we aren't living in Bible times. There'll be no miracle to keep t' flour at one level, choose how much you give away. You're

always bringing t' Bible in, but it doesn't fit this time.”

“It fits every time,” said her mother, “if you use it right. You 'aven't lived as long as me, Maud Annie, or you'd see different—at any rate I 'ope you would, but it isn't always them 'at lives t' longest 'at sees t' most. But you're wrong about mericles. I don't see 'at it says aught about it being a mericle. I don't reckon to understand all I read, but t' plain meaning to me is just this, 'at we've to use t' bit we've got and trust for more to be given us when that's done, and that's t' rule I've always gone by. I'm a plain woman, and I 'ave to read t' Bible in a plain way, or what good would it be?”

Her mouth closed and tightened, but in another moment she continued :

“And as I always say, you never lose naught by doing a kindness. Why, bless you, if you was to go reck'ning up what you'd 'ave left if you was to do your plain duty, and wondering if you'd enough for t' week after next you'd be miserable. You'll learn better after a bit, Maud Annie.”

Sam had nothing to say, but he had full confidence in Mrs. Tickle's judgment, and he never doubted she was right. Maud Annie did not share this opinion.

“It's always for other folk and never for us,” she said gruffly ; then seeing the look on her mother's face repented and went on quickly :

“I didn't mean that. You'd give your life for us, I know, and I'm a rotter. Say no more about it : we shall manage some way.”

Mrs. Tickle's eyes brightened, and Sam got up and reached for his cap.

“It's a rummy thing, is religion,” he said to

himself as he walked home. "There must be more than one sort, same as coals—best, seconds, and sludge. Gertie and Ellen 'as one sort and it turns 'em as sad as cold dumplings, and makes you shiver down your back; but Mrs. Tickle——"

He walked on shaking his head reflectively. "It's same as warming yourself at a fire, listening to Mrs. Tickle," he said. "And as for Cissie—well, that's got to be looked to."

CHAPTER VI

MISS DAISY KNOX AND HER SUITORS.

MISS DAISY KNOX at the age of twenty-three was a vivacious and attractive young lady who ruled her father with a rod of iron painted to look like straw. In ordinary matters Mr. Knox was a man of the most uncommon common-sense, but in Daisy's hands he was almost a puppet and danced cheerfully to any tune she cared to pipe. Indeed, Pygmalion was not more enamoured of the fair statue he had carved than was Mr. Knox of the graceful maiden who presided over his domestic arrangements, and who was, as he realised, a remarkable chip to have been produced from his own rough block. Daisy was a queen who could do no wrong, and the pity of it was that she knew it and was thus confirmed in the good opinion she entertained of herself, which needed no such buttress. It was indeed her father's fault rather than her own that she had an exaggerated sense of her importance and wisdom, just as it was his fault that she had been sent to an expensive boarding school, where artificial gentilities had been the most cherished feature of the curriculum.

Fortunately for Daisy and for other people, she had inherited some of her father's common-sense, and those who knew her best were convinced that in time this

useful seedling would multiply and choke the thorns of conceit (good being, after all, stronger than evil), and that she would develop into a fine sensible woman. The only fear was that before this consummation should have been reached the girl might take a wrong step and make a mess of her life; but no such consideration troubled Daisy, nor up to the present had it worried her father.

Daisy's life had been singularly free from trouble, for though she had been motherless from a very early age her father had done his best to fill the gap, and as his business prospered he had been able to surround her with comforts and to shield her from care. Nobody knew what it had cost him to part with her when the need of a genteel education made it imperative that they should separate, but the pain he experienced helps to explain his readiness to furnish the suburban residence to please his cultured daughter's fastidious taste on her return.

To tell the truth, he had found Daisy's requirements fearful and wonderful, and the camels she bade him swallow came very near to sticking in his throat on more than one occasion. Take the matter of wall-papers as an example. Mr. Knox liked to see birds of paradise sporting on green foliage as he climbed the stairs: he liked to have roses and violets suspended from festoons of silk greet his eyes as he lay upon his bed, and these browns and greys that Daisy insisted on were miserable substitutes to his thinking, but he yielded and in the end quite heartily, because it occurred to him that it was ridiculous to spend so much money on Daisy's refinement and then gird at its manifestations.

So the walls were papered in drab, and the floors

carpeted in delicate art shades, and the drawing-room adorned with etchings and engravings of the most modern school. That would not have mattered very much if Daisy had been content to leave the dining-room alone, but she forced her father to buy some barbaric oil paintings which had been hung at a post-impressionist exhibition at the local art gallery. In Mr. Knox's private judgment these pictures were not good enough to be given away as almanacks, but Daisy, who had taken honours in art at the boarding-school, and who was a member of the Arts Club in the city, told him they were exquisite. Poor Mr. Knox shrugged his shoulders and signed his cheque and wondered if he would have liked pictures that seemed to have been painted with the maul-stick and the palette knife if he had been sent to boarding-school.

One concession had been made to Mr. Knox's lack of refinement, and the breakfast-room rioted in a miscellany of old-fashioned comfortable chairs and couches which Daisy had allowed her father to save from the wreckage of their former home. Here Mr. Knox had a free hand—it was his room—and here he smoked his pipe in great contentment.

Daisy, therefore, was queen, but her happiness was not unalloyed. She had one trouble—one great overwhelming, ever-present burden of dissatisfaction: she was called Knox, and could not, at present, get away from it. Her father did not mind: he wanted to know what was wrong with the name: even professed to like it. He occasionally teased her by making jokes and puns about it, and couldn't for the life of him see anything "obnoxious" in it. Daisy hated it, and made up her mind to exchange it for a better at the first favourable opportunity.

Two men were competing for the privilege of supplying the opportunity, but one of them was so hopelessly handicapped that Daisy tried to shut him out of her thoughts and to persuade herself that she could not possibly open the door to him though he knocked hard for admission. The unfortunate suitor was Jonas Peacock, a sturdy, intelligent man some three years older than she, whom she had known all her life and had imagined she loved until she began to realise that love would mean marriage, and that marriage would mean—Peacock: “Mrs Jonas Peacock!” It was unthinkable. Knox was bad enough, but there had been at least one highly reputable person of that name who had figured in history, as her father sometimes reminded her, but Peacock! and Jonas Peacock!—who had ever heard of names like those on the scroll of fame?

Poor Joe, as she had called him in former days, could not at first conceive why he had been dropped so suddenly, but he was a man who kept his eyes open and used his wits, and he soon found out, and he did not hang his harp upon the willow or betake himself to strong drink or sonnet writing, nor did he absent himself from the house and treat the girl with coldness. He was very independent and tenacious, and the fact that he could form a steady judgment when he was over head and ears in love with a girl who slighted him shewed that he was a man of unusually strong character.

Jonas was a doctor and comfortably off. He was medical officer to the Education Authority in the city, and was regarded as likely to “make something out.” He was also secretary of a Sunday school and conductor of a chapel choir, and for many years Daisy and he

had met regularly in both places, but now a great gulf yawned between them on Sundays, for the girl had discovered that the Established Church made a stronger appeal to her spiritual and artistic nature, and had persuaded her father to worship at St. Martin's.

"All right," Joe had said; "when you're tired of being silly you'll come back," whereat Miss Daisy had been greatly offended, though in her heart she marvelled and admired.

The other competitor was, as Sam had discovered, her father's manager, Mr. Bertram Lycester. Jonas did not like Mr. Lycester; there was too much dash and nonsense about him for his taste, and he summed him up contemptuously as "dotty." Mr. Lycester's style was cheap and flashy. He was veneer that took a fine polish, and he looked so bright and attractive that many people besides Daisy took him at his own price, which was not by any means a low one. He was the same age as Jonas, but whereas the doctor would have passed for thirty, Mr. Lycester did not look a day older than his years, he was so very active and dashing. He was the sort that swings through life—swings out of a tramcar or through a doorway, giving an impression of alertness and boundless energy. It was this that had won for him Mr. Knox's admiration when he first set eyes on him, and since his installation as manager at the Emporium he had allowed no flies (to use Sam's expression) to settle on any of those whom he controlled. Latterly his main business had been to win the heart of Daisy and so ensure for himself a comfortable position as prospective proprietor of the Emporium.

There were a few things about Mr. Lycester that

Mr. Knox did not like. He did not take kindly, for instance, to the frock-coat and the button-hole, seeing that he himself favoured a jacket and had always dubbed men who wore flowers on week-days "Miss Nancys." That was a trifle, however. Nobody could deny that the shop was in better order: the stock more carefully classified: the windows more attractively dressed since Mr. Lycester's viceroyalty began, ten months before, and if new customers did occasionally take him for the proprietor and go away unenlightened—well, there was nothing in that to poison anybody.

So Mr. Lycester had been asked to tea at "The Poplars," and thereafter had made his way to Suburbia to discuss business matters with his principal and art with his principal's daughter a good deal oftener than had been necessary. Mr. Knox thought it an excess of zeal at first, and would have said so if he had not seen that Daisy appreciated and encouraged the visits, and known that Daisy was an autocrat. When he saw that, he was sorry, for he could tell which way the wind was blowing, and it disturbed him. He had got into the way of regarding Jonas as his future son-in-law with secret satisfaction. Jonas was a man after his own heart. He liked the homely atmosphere of the breakfast-room. He liked a pipe and a fender he could put his feet on and pictures that were pleasant to look at; and he liked to talk about politics and town councillors and the things that were in the newspapers. Mr. Knox would have welcomed him gladly if he had asked to be allowed to call him father.

Daisy, however, appeared to be of another opinion, and after all it was Daisy's affair, not his; and if "Bert" was to be the favoured one he only hoped

that Jonas wouldn't make a fuss about it, and that he himself might be left undisturbed in his own room and not expected to talk art and poetry amid the depressing neutral tints of the drawing-room. He had yielded the chapel regretfully, for the corner of a pew was much more comfortable than a rush chair, and the sermon and the service in the chapel afforded longer intervals of rest than he could secure at church, but he determined that he could not concede the breakfast-room.

What Mr. Knox had not discovered was that the new candidate for his daughter's affections was shallow, surface, veneer. He was somehow a little uneasy about the man—quite unaccountably so—but that might be merely his old-fashioned prejudices. Daisy was modern and wide-awake. Daisy had been educated to know what was what. There, of course, he made a mistake. Daisy was just as much deceived by the veneer as her father, because the veneer was very cleverly done. Mr. Lycester was a man of the nimblest wit. If he had not been he would no doubt have been Mr. Lister instead of Mr. Lycester. He knew that the "Lycester" was calculated to seize people's imaginations as it had done Daisy's—right away. She knew it was pronounced Lister, but she was quite willing to be called Beecham if it could be spelled in the French fashion, or Chumli if it could be spread over eleven letters. "Mrs. Bertram Lycester" on her visiting cards, with "Third Thursday" in one corner would look distinguished, whereas "Mrs. Jonas Peacock!"—ugh!

So the name had been the open sesame to her favour, and after that the rest had been easy enough to such a man as Mr. Lycester.

“What did Mr. Lycester think about cubism?”

Mr. Lycester had never heard of cubism. For aught he knew it might have been a disease that had broken out in Suburbia with a rash and a high degree of infection, but was he on that account nonplussed? Not a bit of it. He shook his head and sighed suggestively as he replied: “Ah, that’s a subject on which I daren’t let myself go”; and Daisy was much impressed and determined to get his views out of him when she knew him better.

And she did, because long before then he had got to know all that was necessary by consulting the latest books of reference at the Free Library, and he spoke like an authority, but with a good deal of deference to his fair auditor’s own judgment. The glibness with which he could discuss the work of the futurists and similar freakish and frenzied developments in art produced the impression that he was genuinely interested in the subject, which was strange, as Jonas remarked to Mr. Knox, on the part of a man who oiled his black hair and kept it as smooth and trim as a croquet lawn. But then Jonas called cubism and every similar form of art “silly nonsense.” The fact is the two men were poles apart—the one was a rock and the other a rocket; and Daisy liked fireworks in attractive wrappings.

So much for the debit side of the girl’s character. On the credit side were a big heart, a warm, generous, unselfish nature, and a very real love for her father, who was the very best father in the world despite his provincialism and defective tastes. The little haughtinesses she sometimes assumed were all a pretence and disappeared as quickly as a summer frost, and all the residents in Suburbia liked her and

welcomed her to their homes, and told each other after she had gone that she would make some man a good wife when she had got the nonsense knocked out of her, and that they hoped for goodness sake she wasn't going to marry the dark-haired dandy from the shop.

That was how matters stood when Sam Munday made the young lady's acquaintance, and though that youth knew nothing about the sentiments of Suburbia he speedily shared them. Sam had a profound contempt for Mr. Lycester and a wondering admiration for Miss Daisy. Picture hats and pretty sunshades and dainty blouses: wristlet watches and pendants that hung carelessly in the pink V below the throat—these things when they formed the reinforcements to a young lady's personal charms were calculated to turn Sam's rather stolid head, and he told himself (seeing that his experiment in trying to interest Gertie in his private opinions had ended unfortunately) that it would be a rotten shame if she were to throw herself away on a "bounder like Blister."

"He oughter ha' been a lady's barber, that chap ought," Sam muttered one afternoon as the manager smirked over the young lady, "or stuck up in a tailor's window to show his clothes off. Jiminy! They've funny tastes, girls 'ave."

He was just telling himself that pretty as Daisy was she was not as strikingly so as Gertie, if allowance were made for the difference in their wardrobe, when he was summoned into Mr. Knox's private office, where Daisy had preceded him a minute or two before. She was sitting in the arm-chair and her father was again balancing himself on the two rear legs of the high stool. She looked up with interest as Sam entered and smiled in the pleasantest way possible.

"Tell Miss Daisy what you've been telling me, Sam," Mr. Knox commanded.

Sam obeyed. Somehow he was not nearly as self-conscious in this elegant young lady's presence as he was in Maud Annie's, and he told his tale connectedly and with a certain simple eloquence born of artlessness and genuine interest. Daisy's eyes grew tender as she listened.

"You seem very fond of Mrs. Tickle?" she suggested when he had finished—she had previously heard something of the history of this friendship from her father.

"Yes, miss," said Sam with quiet enthusiasm, "'cos she's that good to me, you know."

"I see"—Daisy smiled and felt drawn to the lad—"and you want to send these little luxuries to Cissie and they're to know nothing about it?"

"Yes, miss."

Daisy opened the leather satchel that was lying on her knee and drew out a memorandum book and pencil. She put the point of the latter in her mouth whilst she donned her thinking-cap, and then made several entries in the book.

"I'll see to it for you," she said at length. "You'll trust me, won't you?—and I won't give you away."

"Thank you, miss," said Sam; "and if you please, miss——"

"Well?" Her smile was encouraging, and Mr. Knox said: "Go on, Sam. Say what you have to say."

"I was going to say, miss, that if you please, Mr. Knox 'll tell you 'ow much money there is, an' when it's done——"

"Oh, we'll see to that, Sam," Mr. Knox said.

"You shall pay for it right enough and we'll debit it to your account. Why, man, you've over six pounds already. He wants this to be off his own bat, you understand," he explained to his daughter.

Daisy nodded.

"Of course he does," she said. "Leave it to me; but you won't mind if I go to see Mrs. Tickle some time, will you? I don't mean to-day."

Sam thought this over, and then replied: "But she'd 'appen guess," and Daisy nodded again.

"Perhaps she would. Then I won't go yet awhile."

"And if you please, miss," Sam began once more, "you won't tell nob'dy 'at I——"

He stopped abruptly, for he knew what he wanted to say and realised that he dare not say it. Mr. Knox, however, understood and said it for him.

"He doesn't want Mr. Lycester to know, of course, nor anybody else in the place or out of it."

Daisy blushed.

"Nobody shall know from me," she said. "And, Sam, you must come and tell me if you are ever in trouble about them. Will you?"

"Yes, miss," said Sam, and turned to leave.

He had closed the door behind him when he was called back.

"I haven't got the address," said Daisy.

"No. 7, Brick Row, Brickfields," Sam replied.

CHAPTER VII

MAUD ANNIE FINDS THAT MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN.

FOR the second time in eight days Simpson's motor lorry panted up Brick Row and stopped at the door of No. 7. Sooty Bill, who was enjoying the afternoon sunshine as he sat with his knees bunched up to his chin on the low step outside his house, gave a low expressive whistle and damned himself. Punch Lister grunted in reply and went on with his work. He was seated on a three-legged stool on the curb busily occupied in washing dog Toby in preparation for a performance that evening. The bucket of soapy water was in the channel, which thus served as a convenient sink, and Toby, who never became reconciled to these lavations, yelped and wriggled and generally misbehaved himself. Louisa's mother, who had been drawn to the door by curiosity, counterfeited Sooty's exclamation by dashing herself.

"No. 7 seems to ha' come into a fortin," said Sooty sourly. He was evidently wrong side out, and Louisa's mother, resenting the tone as implying something discreditable to her neighbour, expressed the opinion that if some able-bodied men whom she scorned to name would only stir their idle bones and frame to do something there might be more fortunes than one in the Row. Thereupon Sooty roused himself to let loose a torrent of language in which lurid and

sanguinary expressions came as fast as the dots and dashes in the Morse code, and Louisa's mother turned them and tossed them back with equal vigour. Punch's face never changed its expression, and by-and-by the storm that swept over his head subsided, but not before the brightly-painted lorry had tooted itself up the street and out of sight.

Other women had been brought to their doors by the hum of the engine and the noise of the horn, and they stared at each other with mouths agape, as much as to say that there was something really mysterious this time at No. 7. To put two and two together was simple arithmetic and ordinarily well within their power, but they found it impossible to put Simpsons and No. 7 together.

Until it had stopped at the same place a week before, Simpson's lorry had never been seen in the Row within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. Simpsons' was by far the largest grocery store in the city—in fact, it was nothing so common as a grocery store, but an Italian warehouse, with windows that were as attractive as a picture gallery, and an interior that was a parade-ground for fashionably-attired ladies with deep pockets. That, at any rate, was the supposition, for no Brickfields resident had ever been inside the place. Little wonder, therefore, that the neighbours should be curious when the lorry paid a second visit, thus proving that the first could not have been accidental.

Inside No. 7 the mystery was just as great. Cissie, seated in the arm-chair by the fire with a pillow behind her head and a high stool for her feet, looked on with widely-opened eyes in which excitement flamed brightly as her mother emptied the contents of the basket on to the table. Maud Annie, who was nearly

ready for work again, was resting her weight on her left foot and assisting her mother. It was not until the man had closed the door behind him that anything was said. Then Mrs. Tickle looked at her first-born.

"Well, Maud Annie," she remarked, "you can say what you like about mericles, but if this isn't one what is it?"

Maud Annie was engaged in classifying the gifts of the gods, and she did not reply for the moment. She was calculating the cost of jelly and beef essence and a large tin of milk casein and the various small delicacies in glass jars and wondering what it all meant.

"I'd like to know where they come from," she said at length.

"So should I," her mother admitted. "It beats what 'appened to t' prophet when t' birds brought 'im 'is meals morning and evening and 'e drank water out o' t' brook. I've always taken that story to mean 'at 'e'd to shoot for 'imself, like, and live on such as there was 'andy while t' famine was on, but I don't know 'ardly what to think now."

Maud Annie shrugged her shoulders.

"It must be t' doctor," she said. "Aunt Polly's not been near this long time, and anyway she wouldn't go to Simpsons'. Besides, Uncle Arthur 'ud send us a bit of shin beef out of t' shop and think he'd done extra. It can't be anybody else but t' doctor."

Her mother shook her head.

"'E isn't one to lie about it, and 'e says it isn't 'im. I should know by 'is face if 'e was kidding me; and then why should 'e pick us out when there's so many?"

"Why should anybody pick us out?" said Maud Annie. "But somebody has done. If t' doctor

hasn't done it he's got somebody else to do it, and anyway it's charity and I don't like it."

A scowl passed over her face and she turned away peevishly.

"Perhaps God sent them," suggested Cissie timidly and in a tone of awe, and before her mother could reply Maud Annie said—

"P'rhaps He did, but He got somebody to call at Simpsons' and pay for 'em. Mother talks about entertaining angels unawares. It's happen one of them—Mr. Long, maybe; he's one 'at she entertains t' oftenest."

If this was not a sneer, it was a near relation, and Mrs. Tickle spoke more sharply than usual.

"That'll do, Maud Annie. Cissie's more sense nor you, bless 'er, for I've told you many a 'underd times 'at there's naught lost by doing a kindness, and I could find you where it says 'at them 'at 'as pity on the poor lends to the Lord and 'E'll see 'at they get paid back. What did I tell you t' other day about t' barrel o' meal?"

There was a glint of triumph in Mrs. Tickle's eyes and she compressed her lips and nodded at Cissie, as much as to say that the pair of them had discomfited the pessimist. Cissie smiled.

"Mother," she said, "I could like one of them eggs Sam brought me for my tea."

"And bless you, you shall 'ave one," Mrs. Tickle answered and turned to the elder girl. "Now there's a good lad for you—one 'at we did a kindness to, Maud Annie, and 'e's paying us back a 'underd-fold, as you may say. It's little enough t' lad 'll get, and I fair shame to take t' bits o' things 'e's always bringing us, but I can see it pleases 'im."

"Sam's right enough," assented Maud Annie; "he seems to have turned our luck."

Whether luck had turned or not, Mrs. Tickle did.

"You talk about luck same as if life was gaming at cards or pitch and toss. I never could bide to 'ear folks talk about luck. You don't call it luck when you get your wages paid for doing your duty, and there's more wages nor you get at t' mill. Now let's 'ave t' table cleared."

Maud Annie never argued with her mother when she spoke in this tone of voice, so she limped to the cupboard and put away the goods that were under discussion and then spread the cloth for tea. She was thinking all the time, however, and when they were seated round the table a little later she said—

"You talk about miracles, but there's no miracle for little Tottie. She's a sight worse than Cissie, and there's no basket comes for them."

Mrs. Tickle's cup was half way to her lips, but she put it down and looked hard at her daughter.

"I'm glad you thought o' that," she said slowly. "'Appen there isn't no mericle for t' little lass, but there's no law again' sharing ours. I'll go round as soon as we've cleared away and see 'ow they're going on."

"That's you to naught," flashed Maud Annie. "It doesn't do to open one's mouth. We sha'n't be having a basket every week, remember, and t' things are sent for Cissie. Tottie isn't yours. You'd feed all t' neighbourhood if you had your way."

"No, I wouldn't," said Mrs. Tickle with decision, "but I'll feed Tottie. Cissie 'll none grudge 'er a bit, will you, love?"

Cissie shook her head. She had inherited a good

deal of her mother's disposition, whereas Maud Annie appeared to be her opposite. The disparity was not as great as it seemed, and Maud Annie had her uses as a brake, though Mrs. Tickle's large-heartedness did not often run away with her judgment.

A thin wall divided No. 7 from No. 7A, which was reached by way of the narrow passage at the side of the house. When Margaret's husband, Bob Ward, was at home and under the exhilarating influence of liquor, Mrs. Tickle and her family were seldom in ignorance of the event, and in this particular instance familiarity with unwelcome sounds had not bred contempt. All had been quiet in that direction during the afternoon, and Mrs. Tickle, as she went down the passage, congratulated herself that Bob was not indoors.

It was a wretched home that she entered unceremoniously when she turned into the yard, and it had a wretched outlook, for it faced similar and even worse dwellings that hid themselves from public gaze at the back of Rose Street. The pavement, the walls, the houses opposite, the very slates and the lamp-post that was supposed to be red were as black as smoke and grime could make them. Compared with this, the front of Brick Row was a minor Paradise.

Margaret's home was in harmony with its surroundings. The yard itself was hardly less bare. No scrap of carpet covered its broken flags; no solitary picture hung upon the walls. A table, so warped and broken as to be worthless except for firewood and for the limited domestic purposes of the Ward family, stood beneath the window. There was a broken-down couch close to the opposite wall; a dresser with one drawer and a foot missing leaned unsteadily against

the wall that faced the fire, and a couple of chairs and as many stools completed the cabinet-maker's share of the furniture. A fender, battered and broken, stood upon the hearth, and a frying-pan and iron kettle were on the grate. What else there may have been was not immediately visible to the eye.

Contrary to expectation, the lord of this mansion was at home and in possession of the couch. Margaret was sitting on a stool near the fender and the smouldering embers that represented a fire, nursing a child of three, whose frightfully thin face shewed pale beneath a crust of dirt.

Bob lay full length upon the couch with his hands clasped behind his head. He had a pipe in his mouth, but no smoke came from it. He was without coat, and the sleeves of his shirt were patched and torn. The patches had not quite lost their freshness, and the pink and blue stripes gave a touch of colour—almost of gaiety—to the scene which was otherwise so grey. He turned his head carelessly as Mrs. Tickle entered, and was the first to greet her.

"Hello! Mother Tickle," he shouted. "What 'ave you browt us—another o' them loaves o' yours or a bit o' fatty-cake? Marg'ret's sitting on t' purse, an' there's nowt i' t' 'ouse, so you've just come i' t' nick o' time."

Margaret closed her lips and turned her head away. In her eyes there was a hard and hostile look that boded ill for peace if this sort of thing should be continued.

"Sitting on t' purse, is she?" Mrs. Tickle replied sharply. "Then I warrant it'll be flat enough not to 'urt 'er. And as for loaves and fatty-cakes, it isn't to widows like me 'at strong men like you, standing

over six feet in their stockings, ought to look for aught o' t' sort."

"You mean laying six feet on 'is idle back," muttered Margaret; and her husband laughed. He was sober and for the moment facetious.

"Shut up, old 'oneysuckle!" he said, "or else I'll get on to my legs an' then there'll be someb'dy else layin' down on their idle backs wi' a weight on their chest. Just you keep your clapper still while Mother Tickle an' me settles what she's goin' to fetch us."

The calm impudence of the man stung his wife and made her quiver. She flushed deeply and turned round with fire in her eyes and a hasty exclamation on her tongue, but Mrs. Tickle interposed.

"You're an old saucebox, Bob," she said, with an affectation of good-humour that she was far from feeling. She had great tact and had not lived among the riff-raff of the Brickfields all her life for nothing. "I won't say 'at I wouldn't give you a meal if you was starving, same as I throw crumbs to t' birds i' winter, and I suppose gaol-birds has to be fed whether they deserve it or not till they get t' rope round their neck."

This was greatly daring on Mrs. Tickle's part, but she knew her man; moreover, she was absolutely unafraid for herself and in the habit of taking risks. She stood with her hands on her hips and her lips drooped a little at the corners as she continued—

"All t' same, there's too much of you, and your appetite's too 'ealthy to add to my fam'ly, and it 'ud seem you better to nip out and try if you couldn't earn a sixpence while I see if I can 'elp Marg'ret to do something for Tottie."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," laughed the giant; "I'll

sell you twopennorth o' peace. I'll go out o' t' road for twopence."

Mrs. Tickle hesitated. She didn't like it, but her principles were intuitive rather than formulated, and life in the Brickfields required prompt decisions.

"It'll go in beer," she said, "but it won't get you enough to turn you silly. How much peace will twopence buy?"

He laughed again.

"Up to closing time," he replied, and Mrs. Tickle brightened.

"I tell you what then," she said. "I'll give you twopence if you'll promise me two things. One is 'at you'll keep sober, 'cos I know 'at you men are as full o' tricks as a box o' monkeys and can get drink when us women can't get bread; and t' second is 'at you'll come and 'ave a bit o' supper wi' our Maud Annie and me at nine o'clock."

Margaret turned and stared at her, and Bob rose and stretched himself. His coat had been under his head and he put it on. Now that he was on his feet his size and weight were strikingly apparent, and most people would have experienced a sense of contemptuous disgust as they looked on the huge proportions of a man who had been framed by nature for a master workman and had degenerated into a bullying loafer.

If the week's growth of black beard had been removed and an experiment made in the restorative effects of soap and water, Bob's face might have been considered almost handsome. He was only thirty-five, and dissipation had not utterly dimmed the sparkle in his black eyes nor spoiled the curve of his mobile lips. He had a shock of black hair that curled a little and

rioted pleasingly, and a devil-may-care expression that shewed that he took the ills of life carelessly. He looked neither weak-willed nor weak-witted.

Mrs. Tickle gave the man two coppers without exacting the promise, though she repeated the condition as she passed them over. Bob simply laughed.

"So long, old scrat-an'-bite!" he called to his wife as he went, and Mrs. Tickle drew the other stool up to the hearth.

"That's twopence chucked down t' gutter," said Margaret, "an' if 'e'd only go with it it 'ud be cheap at t' price."

She spoke wearily, but with a savage intonation that was impressive in its intensity, and Mrs. Tickle shook her head. Like most of her sex, she was harder on the women than on the men in her judgments.

"You rub 'im up t' wrong way, Marg'ret," she said. "Why, t' look you gave 'im 'ud ha' stirred anybody's bile. Menfolk 'as to be humoured. Nob'dy but 'im 'at made 'em knows why they was built so cranky, but they are as they are, and it's wer own fault 'at we marry 'em—there's no getting away from that—and what we've got to try to do is to shape 'em into something better."

"You'll none shape yond," said Margaret bitterly. "'E's bone lazy an' nowt but muck. God Almighty 'Isself could make nowt o' such as yond. Mop, mop, mop, while ever 'e's a penny, an' then come 'ome an' take 'is belt to me an' Tottie 'cos there's nowt to eat."

Mrs. Tickle nodded.

"I know," she said sympathetically; "but don't you get it into your 'ead, Marg'ret lass, 'at there's naught to be made out o' muck. T' bread we eat and wer taties and what not—they all come out o' t' muck."

My sister Polly's 'usband 'as a bit of a garden, and 'e fair smothered it wi' manure a year or two sin'—muck and muck to it, as you may say—but 'e grew some o' t' grandest roses you ever set eyes on. But it took a lot o' patience. I wouldn't like to say 'at 'Im above could make naught out o' your muck-heap, Marg'ret, if 'E'd a bit o' 'elp."

"I wish 'E'd frame then," muttered Margaret. "I'm stalled."

Mrs. Tickle said no more but turned to the child, who all this time had rested her head against her mother's shoulder and taken no more interest in the conversation than if she had been unconscious. Her heart sank as she looked at her.

"Bring Tottie into our 'ouse a bit," she said, "and we'll see if we can't make her a sup o' something nice. You could like Maud Annie to 'old you, couldn't you, Tottie?"

The child said "Em" in a thin voice that was without eagerness, and Margaret added—

"I know 'ow Maud Annie 'll look—same as I should at 'er if t' boot was on t' other leg an' she was allus comin' cadgin' from me."

"That's naught," returned Mrs. Tickle. "There's more bark nor bite about Maud Annie. She's same as a cart-wheel 'at creaks till it's greased and then runs easy enough. You want to take no notice of 'er."

The first thing Maud Annie did was to wash the child and sew up some rents in her clothes.

"The least you could do, Margaret," she said, "would be to keep her clean. You don't give her a chance."

Tottie nestled against Maud Annie's breast and basked in the firelight; then drank a few spoonfuls of

beef-tea with an effort and afterwards went to sleep. Maud Annie tried to forget the towzled hair and the suspicions it gave rise to as she crooned a slumber song. Mrs. Tickle and Margaret conversed in undertones.

"It's all very well talkin' about keepin' clean," said Margaret, "but I've no 'eart for owt. I wish Tottie were ta'en an' me wi' 'er. 'Ell couldn't be no worse nor what we 'ave every day. An' yon devil 'alf murders us when 'e's drunk an' laughs at us when 'e's sober."

Mrs. Tickle nodded.

"It's bad to bide," she said.

"What 'ave I done," continued the other hotly, "'at I should 'ave to live a dog's life, same as I 'ave? Other women can 'ave nice 'omes an' enough to eat. What 'ave I done to 'ave to live in 'ell?"

"I don't see 'at you've done aught, Marg'ret," replied Mrs. Tickle, "save wed t' man 'at put you there."

"An' it 'ud ha' paid me better to ha' drowned myself," said Margaret bitterly. "But I wasn't t' first to be ta'en in by size an' good looks. But what's t' use o' talkin'? What's done can't be undone."

"No," said Mrs. Tickle, with a momentary tightening of the lips; "when t' knot's tied it's a job for poor folks to get it untied; and as for picking a man for 'is size it's cold comfort to say 'at you oughtn't to ha' been so easy ta'en in, and 'specially seeing as t' Almighty Himself was ta'en in wi' Saul. I reckon naught much o' big men, but I always say 'at what women lacks i' size and strength they can make up i' gumption. They're a rough lot, our men folks, but I've lived a long time in t' Brickfields and

I've never known one of 'em smoothed wi' using t' nutmeg-grater. But there! I didn't do so well myself when my man was alive 'at I need start preaching to other folks. It's a long lane they say 'at 'asn't a turning, and there may be a change before so long. Now get Tottie to bed—she's fast asleep, see you—and I'll slip round after a while wi' a bit o' supper for you."

CHAPTER VIII

SERGEANT SMITH CELEBRATES HIS PROMOTION, AND
NO. 7 BECOMES THE SCENE OF A TRAGEDY.

C ONSTABLE SMITH was in the very best of tempers and inclined to think this world the best of possible worlds in spite of its criminals. Indeed, the world without criminals would hardly have been worth living in, for it was a reasonable inference that it would in that case also be without constables, and if there were no constables there would be no sergeants, and Mr. Smith had just been promoted to that rank. The honour, and the brief words of commendation that the chief had suffered himself to utter, had filled Mr. Smith to overflowing with the milk of human kindness, and he had gone the round of his limited circle of friends delivering the news and the milk at the same time and taking pay from their congratulations. Mrs. Tickle was reserved till the last, and the thought of her cosy home caused the sergeant to turn out of his way and buy a pound of cooked pork with plenty of "crackling," a delicacy which made a strong appeal to his own palate and was likely to be appreciated by Mrs. Tickle and Maud Annie. He was not on duty until ten o'clock, and he decided that supper at nine in congenial company would be (it was his own expression) "just the ticket."

Mrs. Tickle welcomed him with much warmth and made him take the arm-chair, which he filled dangerously, but she chuckled softly to herself as she remembered the other guest who was invited to supper.

The sergeant smoked his pipe and watched the clock and the preparations for the meal, and talked desultorily.

"I saw that young scamp of a Sam Munday the other day," he said. "I'd never set eyes on him before since I sent him up here, and he'd gone clean out o' my mind with me being taken off point duty. I was stood in t' middle of t' road with a new 'un we've got when my lord comes along, hooting for us to get out of his way same as he'd been t' King and t' House of Parliament. I was just going to let him have a bit of lip when he pulls up and holds out his hand that patronising I hadn't a word, and it was Sam."

"He's a grand lad, is Sam," remarked Mrs. Tickle with conviction; and she told her part of the story from the beginning.

The sergeant's face shewed modified satisfaction.

"Well, you can never be sure," he said, "but it isn't oft that Frank Smith gets taken in. I don't say it hasn't been done, because there's odd 'uns that 'ud get past King Solomon let alone one of t' force, but I felt certain the lad wasn't a wrong 'un. The young beggar wanted me to have my twopence back, and when I wouldn't he gave me a tanner for t' Orphanage fund. I give you my word he took the wind out of me. But he'll make his way will that lad; just see if he doesn't."

Mrs. Tickle agreed, and the sergeant proceeded in his deliberate manner to relate his experiences of boys

who had turned out well and others who were treading the sure path to the gallows, when the clock struck nine, and with the last stroke there came a knock on the outer door and Bob entered noisily.

He saw the sergeant at once and recognised him.

"Hello! old cock," he said, as he tossed his cap into the window bottom and seated himself astride a chair. "Who'd ha' thowt o' meetin' you 'ere?"

The sergeant stiffened. He glanced at Mrs. Tickle for an explanation of this unwelcome intrusion, but she had her back to him, and his voice became professional as he replied significantly:

"No, we generally meet in another place, Ward."

Maud Annie was busy in the bedroom, but her mother now called her and bade the sergeant draw up his chair.

"Thomas 'll be late 'ome," she explained, "and I asked Bob to look in for 'is supper before I knew you were coming."

Mr. Smith made no audible comment, but his good humour had vanished, and Bob burst out—

"Don't you let it make no diff'rence to yer appetite, Smi——" Then he noticed the stripes. "Well, I'm blessed!" (The word wasn't "blessed," but it will serve.) "Sergeant! is it? Give us 'old o' yer paw."

He stretched his hand across the table and Mr. Smith suffered the giant's squeeze reluctantly and cast a rueful eye on the fourth plate that stood opposite his pork. Then Maud Annie appeared and looked even blacker than the sergeant.

What a meal that was! Mrs. Tickle and Bob enjoyed it most because both had a certain sense of humour. Maud Annie's sympathies were with the officer, who on his part was divided between disgust

at finding himself in such low company (when off duty) and regret at not having bought an extra half-pound of pork. Bob had had just sufficient to drink to make him reckless, but he was not drunk and he confined himself to banter.

"It's a grand trade is a bobby's," he said, "defendin' t' innycent an' punishin' t' guilty, an' makin' a bit out on 'em both. I've allus rued 'at I didn't join t' force i'stead of becomin' an honest bricklayer. My father 'ad a cousin 'at wor a bobby, an' when 'e died 'e left more brass nor 'e'd ever earned, but t' secret died wi' 'im. I allus admire t' force for their intelligence."

He cut himself another thick slice of bread from the loaf and appeared to have no quarrel with the tea that was provided. Mr. Smith's face was stern, and he tried to put dignity into his voice when he replied—

"If you'd been in the force, Ward, you couldn't have been at the Town Hall much oftener than what you are," which was a gross exaggeration that Bob appeared to enjoy.

"If I were you, Mr. Smith," said Maud Annie, with her nose in the air, "I wouldn't waste my breath sparring with him. A man can't go on talking so long by himself."

Maud Annie's tone was distinctly unfriendly, but it only added to Bob's amusement. Mr. Smith grunted a little as he replied—

"It's his night out this time, and sorry I am that it's been my luck to come across him, but it's turn and turn about i' this world, and I shall be holding the cards before so long."

Bob pursed up his lips and made a clucking noise with his tongue.

"For shame o' yerself, sergeant," he remonstrated. "Men i' your position ought to shew a Christian sperrit afore ladies in their own 'appy 'ome," and he held out his plate for another helping of the sergeant's pork.

The action was too much for Mr. Smith. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. Now that the evening had been spoiled for him he did not care to stay longer. Providence had played him a shabby trick : virtue had been discouraged : the milk of human kindness had been soured.

"I must be going," he said frigidly. "There's some that's content to put their long legs under other folk's tables and eat what honest men have worked for. I'll say 'good-night,' Mrs. Tickle and Maud Annie. I daresay we shall see each other again before long, Ward."

"Good 'ealth!" said Bob, raising his cup and putting his lips to it.

Mrs. Tickle accompanied the sergeant to the door and tried to mollify him, and Bob stretched out his fork to take the one remaining piece of meat. Maud Annie's hand restrained him.

"No you don't," she said. "That's for Thomas."

"Pork's bad for kids at bed-time," he said as he secured the spoil with his disengaged hand. "You'll be thankful i' t' night when you wake up an' find 'at Tommy isn't sick. I'm doin' you a kindness."

"I hope it'll poison you," said Maud Annie savagely.

"That 'ud be doin' Tommy a kindness," he said as he gulped it down.

Tears of vexation stood in the girl's eyes as she rose in a temper and began to clear the table, and her

mother coming back and noticing them and the empty dish drew her own conclusions.

"You're a torment, Bob," she said. "I don't wonder 'at Marg'ret's at 'er wits' end wi' you. Pull your chair up to t' fire. - I want to talk to you."

He obeyed, winking the while at Maud Annie, who threw him an angry look.

"That's it, is it?" he said. "I thowt there'd be summat up yer sleeve. Well, we'll 'ave t' sermon while Maud Annie takes up t' collection."

"I don't know about sermons," Mrs. Tickle replied. She had seated herself in her own chair, but she left her knitting untouched and bent her eyes on her rollicking guest. "I'm not one 'at 'olds wi' preaching at men, but there's something 'at's got to be said, and I may as well say it."

She paused, and Bob remarked that one drawback to a widow's hospitality was that it did not include tobacco. He put his empty pipe in his mouth, however, and his feet on the brightly polished fender.

"Go on, then," he said. His eyes kept wandering about the comfortable room, and his voice became less hilariously aggressive. Thomas came in at that moment and seeing who was present called out that he had had his supper and went upstairs to bed.

Mrs. Tickle leaned forward and spoke impressively.

"Bob," she said, "you're going to lose your Tottie. I've lived long enough to know, and I've seen childer in t' Brickfields wi' t' same look on their faces and it's always meant death. I've said naught to Marg'ret, but she'll be gone before long, you'll see."

The man roared out a savage oath.

"I can't 'elp it, can I?" he asked. "Let 'er die! She'll be better off dead nor livin', an' there'll be one

mouth less to feed. What is there for 'er to live for? If 'alf t' brats i' t' Brickfields was poisoned off it 'ud be better for them 'at's left. Other folks think it: I say it, Sarah Tickle."

Maud Annie's eyes flashed and her mother's face hardened.

"That's a nasty thing to say, Bob Ward," she said, "and spoken like a coward, too, but it's most of it bluster, and I won't believe you're as bad as you make yourself out to be. I don't say you *can* 'elp it now, 'cos it's got too far, but you *could* 'ave 'elped it. But that's neither 'ere nor there. She's yours, poor little thing, and you must be kind to 'er while she lasts."

The man scowled.

"You want to tame yon she-bear," he said, "an' then there'd be a chance for t' whelp."

"She-bear!" exclaimed Mrs. Tickle, but without undue resentment. "And what do you call yourself, then? There's a bit o' t' pepper-pot about Marg'ret, I'm not denying, but women's like to get snappy when they've childer to think of, and don't know where to turn to fill their little stomachs. It's same wi' all animals, but it's only men 'at ought to ha' more sense what turns again' their own. He-bears 'll look after t' mothers and t' young 'uns, I'll warrant; and anyway, if both 'im and 'er is always snapping there isn't likely to be peace in t' place. Bob, I could like you to give 'em a chance."

"Let 'er start t' first," he said.

Mrs. Tickle looked at him and he looked at her and laughed. She had never realised before what devilry there was in the man, and she experienced an increasing difficulty in controlling herself. She had

to decide what course to take, and her intuitions failed her. The man was heartless, inhuman, adamant. It would have relieved her feelings to have upbraided him as he deserved, but she knew that it would do no good and be a confession of failure. Whilst she hesitated Bob let himself go, and it seemed as if he had become devil-possessed. He tilted back his chair, put his feet on the top of the grate, and began to sing a vulgar song in a loud, roystering voice.

Maud Annie jumped to her feet and faced him with clenched fists and a frame that trembled with indignant excitement.

"You heartless, foul-mouthed toad," she said. "you come here and let mother feed you just as you let Margaret pine herself and her child to death to keep you alive. You great hulking brute, I'd murder you if I was Margaret. The devil's in you."

The man laughed as he went on singing, and Mrs. Tickle rose.

"That'll do, Maud Annie," she said. "The devil is in 'im right enough, but you'll none cast it out i' that way. You go upstairs and quieten Cissie; don't you 'ear she's calling out and frightened? And I'll deal wi' Bob."

Maud Annie went and Mrs. Tickle put her hand on Bob's shoulder.

"Stop that this minute," she said firmly. "I won't 'ave my childer frightened i' this way. I'm none frightened. I've lived too long in t' Brickfields to be afraid of a bully. You've got to stop or I'll make you."

Her lips were tightly compressed as she stepped back a pace and stood before him with her hands on her hips, and he laughed sarcastically. All the same,

he stopped singing and tilted his chair back to a dangerous angle.

"I'm sorry if I've wakened t' kid," he said lightly.

Mrs. Tickle's face was stern. She had no idea how she was going to deal with the situation, but she was absolute mistress of herself and sure that inspiration would come as required. Before she could speak, however, the outer door opened and Margaret entered. The young woman's face was white and her eyes were wild. She had thrown a shawl about her shoulders and her hands were under it. She walked up to the hearth and rested her back against the table.

"She's dead!" she said in a dull monotone.

"Dead!" exclaimed Mrs. Tickle. "Tottie dead!"

"Yes, dead!" replied Margaret.

Her husband said nothing, nor did he alter his position or turn his eyes towards his wife. From the expression on his face one might have thought that he had not heard, and Margaret drew a deep breath as she looked at him. Then, withdrawing her right hand from the shawl, she raised it in the air and struck the man with all her force upon the head.

He fell over on to the rug like a log and without a sound, and the chair broke under him. Margaret laid an iron weight on the table and folded her arms.

It was Sergeant Smith who came up with the ambulance and two constables half an hour later and conveyed Bob and little Tottie to the mortuary and Margaret to the Town Hall, whence she was soon removed to another establishment, where she still remains and is likely to do so during His Majesty's pleasure.

"Mother," said Maud Annie late that night—

Thomas was sitting with them fully dressed, too dazed and frightened to go to bed again or to take part in the conversation—"Mother, let us leave t' Brickfields. I can't bear it no longer."

Her face was ashen: her eyes were wild and pleading. Mrs. Tickle looked at her and sighed.

"It isn't only in t' Brickfields 'at things o' this sort 'appens," she said gently. "We're all of a tremble now and we shall 'ave to leave it a bit while wer nerves gets steadier. But I should like you and Thomas to know 'ow I feel about leaving. We're among a rough, bad lot, but I've lived 'ere and 'ereabouts all my life, and they're my own people, Maud Annie. And they aren't bad all t' way through—even Bob wasn't, God 'elp 'im—and nob'dy knows better nor you 'ow when they've been i' trouble they've run t' first thing to No. 7. Now where'll they run to if we flit?"

She paused, and Maud Annie groaned.

"Reach me t' Bible, Thomas," she said, and Thomas brought it and handed his mother her spectacles.

"I don't reckon to know things same as if I was religious," she said, with a note of something like shame in her voice; "but I can find you what's been running i' my mind this last hour or so."

She turned over the leaves with her wetted thumb until she came to the story of Elijah when he fled from the face of Jezebel, and she read it aloud haltingly. When she reached the words, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" she closed the book and looked at her daughter.

"I'm distrusting myself a bit to-night," she said, "and it's 'appen pride, but if we run away I shall

feel same as Elijah, and I shall be afraid o' 'earing t' same words, Maud Annie."

Maud Annie did not speak, and her mother's face grew more troubled.

"And yet if it's going to spoil your lives—well, you ought to come t' first. But you see you'll be getting married one o' these days, and you'll find a 'ome of your own, and Thomas 'll shift for 'imself, and if Cissie lives I think she'll be content to stay along o' me. You see where I am, don't you, my lass? All t' bit o' use I can ever be in t' world is down 'ere in t' muck, and if I'm shifted it'll be like tearing me up by t' roots; and I can 'elp my neighbours a bit, can't I? All t' same, you come t' first, and you ought to do, and I shall 'ave to turn it over i' my mind, 'cos it's 'appen naught but pride and thinking a bit too much o' myself, for I remember it goes on to say 'at Elijah thought 'e couldn't be spared and 'e was told 'at there was seven 'underd more besides 'im. But I shall see clearer when I've slept on it."

Maud Annie withdrew her eyes from the fire and fixed them on her mother. A little colour had crept back into her cheeks and the cloud was not so heavy on her brow.

"You've no need to bother," she said. "We'll stop where we are, and I'll try not to worry you about it. I wish I was half or quarter as good as you."

"Whisht! child," said her mother sheepishly. "I believe it's more nor 'alf selfishness."

CHAPTER IX

SAM MUNDAY FEELS THE BURDEN OF HIS RESPONSIBILITIES.

AT the very worst of times, when things had been as black as they well could be, and the daily food and drink provided for him by his parents had been the bread and water of affliction, Sam Munday had contrived to enjoy life. Now that he had started on an independent career and was, so to speak, his own sole proprietor he enjoyed it more than ever. The fact that he had shouldered responsibilities during the four months of his enfranchisement did not detract one grain from his enjoyment; indeed, as Sam reviewed the situation he was conscious that he was supremely happy under the burden.

For sixteen years responsibility and Sam had been strangers to each other, and the bond that now united them was knotty as well as strong, but it never chafed the lad, though he had begun to realise that manhood had its penalties as well as its pleasures.

His work was not his chief care. Work gave him none of the delightful sensations that came with his voluntary responsibilities, for there was no worry connected with work under a master like Mr. Knox. Some of his work-mates differed from him there, for they cordially disliked Mr. Knox's manager, whose

domineering ways were unlike anything they had experienced under the old regime, and a spirit of discontent began to spread over the Emporium, which Mr. Lycester perceived and determined to crush. Sam's disposition was of another order, and the manager's presence and tartness actually enhanced the pleasure he got out of his daily round. To him "Blister" was an appetizer like vinegar to fish and chips or a dash of lemon to pancakes. Without him life at the shop would have been almost insipid; as it was, every day brought its little excitements and opportunities—sometimes many, sometimes few—for getting a bit of his own back.

It goes without saying that Sam's opinion of Mr. Lycester had not improved, but he admired some of his qualities and imitated them. The boy was naturally imitative, a born mimic, like so many of his class, and the man's smartness took his fancy. He saw clearly enough where the manager scored over the master, and he learned some useful lessons from his observations and began to take rather more pains with his speech, but he was not deceived as to the man's character. In his judgment Blister was a "rank wrong un"—a clever sly-boots who was out for number one all the time, and who cared for himself more than for all the world (including Miss Daisy) put together, and therefore a fit subject for practical jokes and for unobtrusive experiments of the kind dear to the heart of boys who have been brought up on "pictures" and Sherlock Holmes.

So Sam got as much fun out of Mr. Lycester as that gentleman got service out of Sam, and it was well for the lad that he had always complete control over his features. For present purposes Sam's honest but

plain face was his fortune, and as useful to him as well-used fortunes are wont to be. He waited days for the opportunity to drop a pinch of strong cayenne into the manager's button-hole, and when it came at last and Mr. Lycester, after burying his nose in the flowers (which was one of his unconscious habits when anyone was talking to him across the counter) began to sneeze violently, Sam brought him a glass of water with an innocent air and a look of real concern that actually commended him to his victim and led the waiting customer to remark that Sam seemed to be a thoughtful young fellow. It was a correct observation.

Something was always going wrong. Mr. Lycester's hat or gloves or overcoat would be found missing at most inopportune times and turn up in places where their owner *might* have placed them in a fit of abstraction; but no trap that was set ever caught Sam, though it was specially baited for him, because he prepared all his plots carefully and took nobody into his confidence. His was one of those uncommon natures that get the reward of mischief from its satisfactory accomplishment, and are not dependent on the plaudits of unsafe confidants.

These things, however, were trifles—the spice of life in a measure but designed merely to tickle the palate and create a pleasant sensation. Sam had a deeper craving: he longed to clip the wings of Mr. Lycester's ambition: to prevent the unholy alliance with the goddess of the picture-hat and the wristlet-watch, and he set his wits to work in the effort of circumvention.

It was at this point that life became really exhilarating, really vital, and Miss Daisy, though not the first and perhaps not the greatest of his responsibilities, was at present uppermost in his mind.

Miss Mellor and her sister Gertie combined to make a second call upon his services that was almost an obligation. By no stretch of the imagination, by no concession of good-will, could they have been termed genial hostesses, and the atmosphere of the home never got above temperate and was sometimes as low as freezing-point, yet Sam had grown to like them both.

As a housewife Mrs. Tickle herself was hardly more capable than Ellen, but she was a good deal more cheerful. Ellen was a woman with no nonsense about her and no appreciation of nonsense, and she was so religious that whistling on a Sunday turned her instantly to stone. A hymn tune was only a degree better than "Swanee Ribber," and Sam's sole chance of escaping censure and the prediction of a most warm and uncomfortable experience in the next world was to flee the house on Sundays and take refuge with Mrs. Tickle.

Gertie was more indifferent, but in her own way just as much a problem. Sam felt that whilst Ellen's religion was sincere Gertie's was to an extent professional. He was half afraid of Ellen, who had a tongue as well as an austere manner and a hard creed, but he was sorry for Gertie because he felt sure she was unhappy.

Uneasiness and unhappiness manifested themselves in her conduct and in her conversation. She never spoke of her work at the shop in her sister's presence if she could help it, and when Sam said anything he was conscious that she watched him with anxious eyes and held her breath until he left the subject. Gertie was a mystery, and because she was pretty (Sam was becoming a man and had a susceptible heart) he determined that it was his business to help an

unfortunate maiden who was in obvious distress; and he kept his eyes open and his mind alert.

He was thinking about his responsibilities one Sunday afternoon as he turned into Rose Street on his way to Brick Row.

"Fancy me as the pertecter of 'elpless females," he soliloquised with a grin. "Miss Daisy and Gert, to say nothing of Mrs. Tickle and Cissie. Jiminy!"

He appeared to derive great satisfaction from the thought, and chuckled audibly as he walked along. Of course he exaggerated his obligations and was too ready to constitute himself guardian of the distressed, but as it did him good and nobody any harm what did that matter?

The day was sultry, and Rose Street had turned its ragged population on to the steps and sidewalks. Sam sniffed the air as he entered. "Essence o' loafers to-day," he remarked to himself, but he nodded pleasantly to everybody and stopped to exchange a word with some. He was well-known in the neighbourhood by this time, and variously regarded as an amusing "saucebox" or a "young devil with too much lip."

Lady Peggy's residence was a few doors up the street—one of the very few houses that made even a pretence of respectability—and here the door was open and the steps were unoccupied. Sam halted opposite and engaged in conversation with a tattered couple who bantered him on his spruce appearance and inquired if he had his prayer-book in his pocket. Half-a-dozen pigeons wheeled heavily in the air and occasionally alighted in the roadway, where they strutted about unmolested by man or child, but were watched by a

hungry-looking cat which they treated with apparent unconcern.

All at once a scream was heard from the house across the way, and Sam, looking round, saw a canary flutter through the door and settle on the bar of the lamp-post. A moment later it left that point of vantage and flew to a low window sill. Loud laughter greeted Lady Peggy as she sallied forth in pursuit and looked round to discover the bird's whereabouts, and the laughter grew louder as they saw her turn in the wrong direction and noticed that the cat was preparing to spring.

The cat did spring, but it was involuntarily, and Sam's boot had given it an impetus that was no doubt as painful as it had been unexpected. Lady Peggy darted towards the bird, which evaded her grasp and returned to the lamp-post.

Nobody took the trouble to move, but the whole street was in a state of pleasurable excitement, and long odds were laid on the cats, of which there were now two. Lady Peggy shrieked again and used language which was certainly unladylike, and an older woman, strongly-built and hard-featured, appeared at the door and bade her restrain herself. The sole reply was hysterics, and the street roared with laughter.

Sam grinned too, but he climbed the lamp-post, and a stone, aimed by one of the men and that had been designed to frighten the bird and prolong the entertainment, caught him on the forehead and caused the blood to trickle down his cheek, but he got the bird and carried it into the house, where the forbidding-looking woman held open the cage door and closed it upon the truant. Lady Peggy, panting and excited, threw her arms round Sam's neck and kissed him.

Sam blushed and wiped the place with his sleeve. Only Cissie kissed him; so far as he knew only Cissie had ever kissed him, and this kiss of Lady Peggy's was a pollution. He stumbled out of the house, shutting his ears to the elder woman's suggestion that he should wash his face and staunch the wound, and hurried with cheeks that still burned to Mrs. Tickle's. Sam was not squeamish, and he had certainly no inherited antipathy to young women of Lady Peggy's profession; a few months earlier he would probably have accepted the salutation with a grin of amusement; but at that time he had not known Cissie's kisses.

He gave a ready but garbled explanation of the accident that had disfigured his face, and the household at No. 7 was too accustomed to mishaps of that kind to be unduly curious. Mrs. Tickle washed the wound and rubbed salt into it, and Sam held one of Thomas's red handkerchiefs to the place and began to talk of other matters.

But when Maud Annie took her brother to church in the evening and Mrs. Tickle settled down to the comfort of an unnecessary fire, Sam unbosomed himself and found an interested listener.

"Poor lass!" said Mrs. Tickle. "You've no 'casion to shame, Sam. It's all t' bit o' comfort she 'as, is that canary, and it was just 'er way of saying 'Thank you.' She's good-'earted, is Lady Peggy, and some 'at throws stones at 'er isn't fit to black 'er boots."

"But she's a wrong un, isn't she?" ventured Sam, who though a latitudinarian himself had expected to find Mrs. Tickle's standard straiter.

"We're all wrong uns," she replied shortly, "and Lady Peggy's like t' rest of us—better nor some and

worse nor others. I mind 'er when we came into t' Row, as bonny a little lass as you ever set eyes on, and 'eld 'erself same as a lady. Many and many's the time she's come in 'ere and sat on that stool while she ate a bun or a bit o' curn loaf, and it went to my 'eart when she took a wrong turning and yond old 'ag got 'old of 'er and sold 'er to sin. But I could find you where it says 'at them 'at's without sin may throw t' first stone at 'er, and if she waits while then it'll be a long time before she wants sticking-plaster."

Mrs. Tickle's mouth closed tightly and Sam's brow became slightly furrowed. Mrs. Tickle spoke kindly where Ellen spoke censoriously, yet each "went by" her Bible and used it as an authority. He shook his head in answer to his thoughts, and his adopted mother smiled.

"Well, what's worrying you?" she asked.

"It's a rum thing, is religion," Sam replied slowly. "It's same as it acts different ways wi' different people. It lays 'eavy on Ellen's stomach and makes 'er snap your 'ead off if you go again' 'er. Now *she* wouldn't walk on t' same side o' t' road as Lady Peggy, and she's as sure she's booked for you know where as if she'd seen t' ticket."

"Oh, is she?" Mrs. Tickle's tone was slightly contemptuous, but it speedily became normal. "Never you mind about Ellen. She's 'appen as much to be pitied as Lady Peggy if all was known; but you take a leaf out o' my book and when you're looking for other folks's faults put your eye to t' wrong end o' t' spy-glass. There's lots 'll run to lift up a 'orse when it falls 'at 'ud leave a poor lass 'at's fallen to lie in t' gutter."

Sam turned this over and then asked :

"Is there different sorts o' religion for churches and chapels and mission 'alls? 'Cos the old gent wi' the white whiskers what's Ellen's minister 'as a face as long as Sundays, and that little red-cheeked chap at the 'all is as pleasant as Mr. Knox, and your parson is neither one thing nor t' other. I can't reckon it up."

Mrs. Tickle's mouth relaxed.

"It takes a bit o' reckoning up," she said. "For aught I know they're all supposed to turn out t' same sort of food, but some spoils it in t' baking. My father was church, and I've always stuck to All Saints, and I couldn't like to go anywhere else now, barring t' anniversary at t' mission 'all once a year, but I can't say 'at I get much out o' t' sermon—just a crumb or two now and then. 'Appen," she added with a smile, "that's why it doesn't lay 'eavy o' my stomach."

"Old Whiskers says it's popery at your church 'cos they've a cross and candles," said Sam, interrogatively.

"Well, if old Whiskers doesn't like curns in 'is cake 'e isn't forced to 'ave 'em, and 'e can live on plain loaf," replied Mrs. Tickle; "but some folks 'as to 'ave their appetites tempted a bit, same as our Cissie. I'm none going to say which is t' best, but if I couldn't bite a bit for myself out o' t' Bible before I go to bed of a night I shouldn't get fat wi' over-feeding."

Sam was silent for a time, and then said—

"Well, I like your sort t' best anyway," and wondered if he ought to add Lady Peggy to his other responsibilities.

CHAPTER X

MR. KNOX BECOMES SUSPICIOUS AND ALSO ANXIOUS.

MR. KNOX closed the door of the private office behind him and stood in the middle of the floor with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat and surveyed the pattern on the oriental rug without seeing it. He saw instead the sullen faces of some two dozen women and girls in the workroom at the top of the building. Not a face had brightened at his entrance : not one word of pleasant greeting had been offered : even Miss Wilks had been constrained and formal in her manner, and the others had turned their backs on him and made it evident that they did not seek his notice. Mr. Knox had left the room, and not for the first time, with the uncomfortable feeling that he was no longer the popular master he used to be, and he did not like it.

It was the same on the lower floors. There was only one among the forty odd workpeople whose names figured on his wages sheet who was always cheery and pleased to see him, and that was Sam. Sam's face never lost its smile. Sam watched for an opportunity to do him a service. Sam was a good lad and an acquisition ; Mr. Knox's brow lifted as he thought of him.

It fell again, however, pretty quickly, for just as one swallow doesn't make a summer, so one good-

tempered lad doesn't make a contented Emporium, and it was one of Mr. Knox's cherished ambitions that his workpeople should sing his praises. Up to the advent of "Bert" they had always done so, and he had gone in and out among them as a friend. He was conscious that he had done nothing to warrant the change of attitude: nothing, that is to say, except to appoint Mr. Lycester as manager, and it was undeniable from the point of view of business that the appointment had been a good move, for things were humming as they had never hummed before. All the same, as Mr. Knox frowned at the inoffensive reds and blues of his carpet square he was telling himself that he preferred the old chorus to the present hum; and the frown grew deeper as he dwelt upon the cause of the discontent.

He did not deceive himself of course. He was much too shrewd and wideawake not to know where the trouble lay. It was Bert who had oiled the machinery of production but dropped grit upon the wheels of good-will. It was Bert who was cordially disliked by everybody and who was diverting the overflow of his unpopularity upon him, his master. Nobody had told him that the manager was hated—nobody now told him anything—but Mr. Knox, if he did not know much philosophy, was able to trace the connection between effect and cause in a simple matter of this kind.

As he stood there motionless except for the working of his features he was analysing his own mind with respect to Mr. Lycester, and he found that he was beginning to distrust him; that in fact he had distrusted and almost disliked him for some time. For the last three days he had been playing the spy, and he had felt uncomfortably mean, for at heart he

loathed anything of the kind, and he was ashamed of himself even though he had decided that the end justified the means.

The private office was situated at the far side of the shop and had an elevation of three feet or thereabouts which enabled its occupant to overlook his assistants quite easily if he should be so inclined. A window of plate glass ran the entire length of the office, and from its upper part that end of the Emporium borrowed its light. The lower part was screened by a curtain or series of curtains of green silk suspended from a brass rod, which gave to the office what Mr. Knox called a "classy" appearance and prevented anyone on the floor of the shop from seeing what was going on within. On the other hand, of course, it neutralised the advantages of a window, inasmuch as it concealed what was taking place in the shop from the eyes of the proprietor.

Up to a week ago Mr. Knox had considered that this was as it should be. His was not a suspicious nature, and to watch every movement of those whom he employed was not his idea of oversight. Consequently he preferred, and had always used, the high desk underneath the window that looked into the back street, where his face was away from the green curtains, and the width of the office prevented any ordinary sounds in the shop from reaching his ears. Latterly, however, he had crossed to the other side and pulled his comfortable swing chair up to the table that stood beneath the plate glass and had transferred his books and inkstand there. Also he had so adjusted the green curtains as to get a view of the counter and a certain space in front of it, and he had done all this deliberately with the object of playing the spy.

If Mr. Knox had been asked a fortnight before the question he was now asking himself what it was that had aroused his suspicions, he would probably have had some difficulty in replying, and might have answered snappishly that he wasn't suspicious: that he was merely cautious. A man doesn't suspect the genuineness of every coin he rings on the counter, and though Mr. Knox's employés did not like Bert as their ruler it by no means followed that he was a bad sovereign. Mr. Knox had lived quite long enough to know quite well that all that glitters is not gold, but he was also aware that real gold does not always glitter, and what he had set himself to do was to discover whether or no Bert was the genuine article.

What he had seen through the slit in the curtain he had not liked, but it had caused him no surprise, and it was that reflection that was deepening the frown on his brow. He was realising that he had expected to find Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in his manager.

In his presence Bert was one of the most affable of men; a flatterer by suggestion rather than by downright affirmation; with a modified good word for all the employés who would not ail much when they should have settled down to the new conditions. Mr. Lycester's heart was large enough to include them all, and if he was occasionally severe, the rod was of the "cruel-to-be-kind" order. Kindliness combined with firmness was evidently Mr. Lycester's motto, and it might have satisfied his master but for that gentleman's instinctive feelings and the sour looks of his workpeople and the slit in the curtain.

Through that tell-tale slit Mr. Knox had seen another Bert, with a face from which the benignity

had vanished and a manner that did not commend itself to the proprietor of the Emporium; and his uneasiness was increasing fast.

At this point the reader who is a business man laughs sarcastically. He knows quite well how he would have dealt with the situation, and cheapens Mr. Knox considerably as a master. That is all very well, but there were complications that have yet to be considered—there was Daisy.

Daisy bulked large in Mr. Knox's thoughts that afternoon. Daisy smiled on Mr. Lycester: saw no flaw in him: regarded him as a mixture of wisdom and art—Solomon and Michaelangelo in adorable combination. She was perfectly sure he was born to achieve greatness, for he almost said so; and though he was of lowly parentage he bore the unmistakable look of the man who journeys from the Log Cabin to the White House. There was unfortunately no slit in the very green mental curtain that hid the real man from Daisy's eyes, and the girl was fascinated by the airs and graces, the polished glittering surface of her admirer.

It was midsummer, and Mr. Knox and his daughter were spending a few weeks at Morecambe, which was conveniently situated for business—only two hours' run by a quick train. Daisy had thought it would be "nice" to invite Mr. Lycester to accompany her father for the week-end, and had said so.

Mr. Knox had kicked, but so had Daisy, and more effectively; and when the Saturday came two additional guests shared the Knox's table at "The Central"—Mr. Lycester and Mr. Peacock. Jonas had objected, but Mr. Knox would take no refusal, and the two had played gooseberry (a definitely sour berry it was) to

Daisy and Bert. That was the complication; and it was not until Mr. Knox had looked upon his office carpet until the design had almost mesmerised him that the tremendous overbalancing thought struck him that Daisy was young and foolish.

Every married woman and the great majority of men would have known that all along, but Mr. Knox belonged to the minority of widowers who are doting fathers, and he experienced the shock of a revelation. It was not exactly that he discovered that his idol had feet of clay: it was rather that he realised for the first time that she was an idol and not, as he had supposed, a goddess endowed with attributes of omniscience and infallibility. It was a fateful moment for Daisy if she had but known it, and for some others too.

"Why, blow it!" he remarked as he began to pace the room, "she's lost her head over the fellow. She can't see through him, with all her schooling, as well as I can."

For the first time since Daisy had put her hair up, taken the mysteries of dress into her own hands, and assumed control of the household, Mr. Knox felt the need of a woman's counsel. Every woman of his acquaintance was summoned to the bar of his mind to be questioned as to her fitness to guide him at this juncture only to be dismissed as unsuitable. He quickened his pace, but there was no corresponding stimulation of the brain. He lingered a while over his wife's half-sister, Jane Butler, of "The Sun," but shook his head as he muttered: "She's as daft over Daisy as I am. Thinks she isn't made of the same sort of clay as her and me. It wants somebody that's brought up a family and has a bit of gumption, this does."

He sat down in his chair and opened a ledger, but his thoughts were rebellious, and he turned over the leaves mechanically. Then his eyes clutched his thoughts, and turned them to the page before him. "Sam Munday and Mrs. Tickle," he read, and he tilted back his chair and began to bite the end of his pen. For a long time he sat thus, swaying gently backwards and forwards, steadying himself by his toes against the underside of the table. Finally he smiled rather grimly as he drew out his pocket-book and made an entry—a copy from the page in front of him. It was quite brief—"No. 7, Brick Row."

This done, his brow cleared and he lit a cigar and pressed a button.

"If Sam Munday's in send him here," he said to the man who answered the call, and in a few minutes Sam came. His duties as chauffeur occupied only an inconsiderable portion of his time, and in the intervals he made himself generally useful in the shop and warehouse.

He closed the door behind him at Mr. Knox's request, and stood rather awkwardly waiting for that gentleman to speak. Ever since Mr. Lycester had threatened to punch his head if he should dare to stand before him with his hands in his pockets he had not known what to do with those useful extremities on these occasions. He did not like to put them behind his back, but the only alternative was to let them hang limp at the side, which was too much like the dolls in the show-case.

Mr. Knox seemed to be in a reverie. He toyed with his fountain pen, beating time with it to the jangled music of his thoughts, but pulled himself together at last.

"That football card idea of yours is going to catch on, Sam."

"Yessir?" said Sam, with a note of interest, but not of eagerness. He had known it would.

"You're going to be worth money to the firm if you go on putting your brains into the business in this way," continued his master. "You've got brains, you know."

He half smiled as he looked up at the lad, and Sam grinned and said nothing. It was not an accusation to worry about.

"Don't you think you ought to improve yourself?" continued Mr. Knox. "You're an ignorant young beggar in lots of things, and you'll feel the want of education one of these days, as I did—as I do yet for that matter. I'd like to see you make something out, and you can if you try. Now why shouldn't you stir yourself? Mr. Lycester started pretty near the bottom of the ladder, he tells me, and look at him now."

Sam looked at him, mentally, and got no pleasure from the inspection. He did not know that his lip had curled a little, but Mr. Knox saw it and was amused.

"Suppose I was to ask a friend of mine to drill you a bit at nights and kind of smarten you up, what would you say?"

Sam's eyes fell. That meant books, and books were bonds. This so-called friend would be nothing better than a task-master. It was not an agreeable prospect, but he could hardly refuse an offer so kindly meant. Then he thought of Cissie. He *was* an ignorant young beggar, for even Cissie was a much better scholar than he, and if he should improve himself, why Cissie would be delighted.

He raised his eyes and saw Mr. Knox's fixed steadily on him.

"That 'ud be extra, sir," he said.

Mr. Knox's eyes twinkled.

"It took you a bit to make your mind up," he remarked, "but I think no worse of you for that. You don't like putting your neck into a collar, I daresay, but it'll be worth your while, and my friend Dr. Peacock takes a deal of interest in lads and likes to help them. I'm sure he'll do it for me."

"And what'll it cost, sir?" Sam ventured.

"Cost?" Mr. Knox laughed. "You'll have to leave that to me. My friend isn't a man you could offer money to. He's well off. Don't you bother your head about payment, and at the same time don't become a money-grubber. You've middling saved up here," putting his hand on the ledger, "and more to follow."

Sam looked confused.

"Please, sir," he said, "I reckon that money's Mrs. Tickle's."

"So you do," replied Mr. Knox. "I forgot. How are they going on?"

"Fine," replied Sam. "Cissie's picking up wonderful."

"Well," said Mr. Knox, "I'll see about that other matter. You'd best keep it to yourself meanwhile. By the way, you get on all right with Mr. Lycester, I hope?"

"Yessir," said Sam, with so much heartiness that Mr. Knox's eyes opened widely. He could not be expected to know that his manager was regarded by the boy as a relish.

"That's all right," he said. "I'll let you know when I've arranged matters," and Sam retired.

No sooner had he closed the door than Mr. Knox swung the chair round and fixed his eyes on the space between the green curtains. What he saw caused the frown to return to his brow, though he soon dismissed it. Mr. Lycester had beckoned Sam to his desk behind the counter, and Mr. Knox saw him bend over the lad and question him. Evidently the answer he obtained was unsatisfactory, for the manager made a grab at Sam which the lad avoided. There was an ugly look on Mr. Lycester's face as he pointed to the steps that led to the basement, but Sam's face was one huge grin as he turned and obeyed the order.

Mr. Knox smiled too.

"I like that young beggar," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. TICKLE "SENSES" A VISITOR.

MRS. TICKLE untied her white apron, folded it neatly and put it away in one of the dresser drawers; then went up to the glass that hung on the wall near the cupboard and surveyed herself. The result must have been satisfactory, for she remarked as she opened another drawer and got out some mending: "There, we're straightened up now, choose who comes."

Cissie looked up from her book. She was seated on a low stool on the hearth, and the firelight lent her cheeks the colour that Nature ought to have supplied.

"Are you expecting somebody, mother?" she asked.

"Nay, love, it's a sort of a feeling I 'ave inside me. I gen'rally know when your Aunt Polly's coming, but I don't think it's 'er this time, though it's long since she was 'ere. And there was a stranger on t' ribs just before we 'ad our dinners 'at was same as it wouldn't shift."

Maud Annie would have ridiculed all this, but Cissie fixed her eyes on the fire and gave herself up to speculation. Her mother was a wonderful woman—the most wonderful and capable, Cissie thought, that the world had ever known. Cissie's was a very small world, of course. Her world of reality extended only

a little way beyond the Brickfields, and her world of history and fairy-tale comprised the Bible and six or seven treasured children's books. There was not a woman in the whole list—not Hannah or the Shunammite, or the Holy Mother herself: certainly no legendary lady of the Sleeping Beauty type, however pink her cheeks or golden her hair—who could hold a candle to her mother. Cissie felt sure in her own mind, though she had never said so to anybody, that if her mother had been Abraham's wife she would not have allowed him to send her away with her little boy into a wilderness where they were almost certain to die of hunger. Her mother would have had more sense than to let her little boy go into the harvest field and get a sunstroke. She was convinced that her mother would have gone about with Jesus and looked after His comfort, for her mother was equal to every situation and always did the right thing. Was it not her mother who had remarked that no woman with any gumption would have dressed Red Riding Hood in scarlet and sent her into a wood where there were wolves? It was more like a man's daft trick. Cissie believed in her mother with all her heart, and in her judgments and premonitions and all her attributes. She trusted her mother's bones when they became conscious of a coming storm, and her mother's corns when they foretold a change of weather, and her mother's inward sensations when they predicted a visitor. There was nothing left to do except to guess whether it would be friend or stranger. Among friends there was only Sam, and Cissie reflected that it was hardly likely to be he, or her mother's feelings would not have rung her up, so to speak, several hours before the event was reasonably possible. Her mind travelled

quickly round the circle of their acquaintances, and having completed the journey abandoned the quest.

Meanwhile Mr. Knox, walking slowly down the hill on his way to the Brickfields area, was busy with his problem and more than half inclined to call himself a silly fool for embarking on such a mad enterprise. He told himself over and over again that his object in visiting Mrs. Tickle was to talk about Sam, but the very emphasis of the declaration and the fact that he repeated it so often showed that his inward auditor was not convinced, and by-and-by he dropped the deception.

"Hang it all," he thought, "Sam 'll do for an excuse, and I shall have to feel my way about Daisy. As likely as not I shall never mention her name."

It was a bright August afternoon, and Brick Row, which was at its best only after heavy rain, was as sightly as a dirty child with a sunny expression. The light was strong upon the side with the odd numbers, and Mr. Knox noticed with satisfaction that the window of No. 7 was gay with flowers and as clean as a new sixpence. The outer door was open, and he knocked and waited.

"Mrs. Tickle?" he inquired when that lady appeared. "My name's Caleb Knox, and I should like a word with you if you've no objection."

Mrs. Tickle neither expressed nor exhibited surprise, but led the way into the kitchen, and asked if her visitor had anything to say that Cissie ought not to hear.

Mr. Knox looked at the child, who had risen and was standing doubtfully, one finger against her lips, and her large eyes fixed wonderingly on the kind-faced stranger.

"A case of 'little pitchers have long ears,' eh," he asked, as he touched Cissie's cheek and gently pinched one of the organs he had mentioned.

"If you ask me," said Mrs. Tickle, "it doesn't matter about t' ears being a bit long if only t' pitcher's water-tight. It's them pitchers 'at leaks easy or 'as too much spout 'at you may suspicion. But she'll nip across and see Louisa and t' baby, won't you, love?"

"Nay," said Mr. Knox. "Let the little lassie stop. I'll go bail her spout's all right by the look of her."

Cissie smiled. She thought Sam's master was very nice indeed, and though she busied herself with her book she kept her ears open, for she had her full share of feminine curiosity.

Mr. Knox sat down and played gently with the child's hair as he explained his errand, or rather his pseudo-errand. He was wondering what he would be able to make of this hard-featured woman with the quick, penetrating eyes, who bore no resemblance to the mental image he had formed of a red-cheeked, comely person, stout and motherly, and brimming over with good nature. Mrs. Tickle's lips were closed, and though the face was shrewd it made no loud appeal for Mr. Knox's confidences.

"I thought I should like a word with you about Sam Munday," he began. "He's often mentioned your name, and I've taken a fancy to the lad. I should like to help him, and I want to find out if you think he's worth it."

This was astuteness on Mr. Knox's part, and it succeeded admirably. If it was a serpentine form of approach it resulted in disposing Mrs. Tickle favourably towards the serpent, and it enabled her to

reveal herself to her questioner, which was just what he wanted. It was not quite three o'clock, and Mrs. Tickle could have gone on eloquently in Sam's praises until five.

Mr. Knox listened and learned a good deal about Sam that was new to him, and calculated to do that enterprising youth no harm; but what was more to the purpose he learned a good deal about Mrs. Tickle, and her cheerfulness and homely wisdom did his heart good.

Now that the object of the visit had been disclosed, as she thought, she was another woman. Her eyes had brightened; the hard lines about her mouth had relaxed, and a sympathetic note rang in her voice. There was something about her and the humble surroundings that reminded Mr. Knox of his mother and his early home, and at a convenient point he interrupted her to tell her so. There was no false pride about the man.

"It was her that taught me to go straight and do as I'd be done by," he said feelingly, "and I'd be just miserable if I thought she could look down and catch me doing aught mean. We were poor, Mrs. Tickle, but she kept us respectable; and when I look round this room and see you sitting in that high chair I could nearly think I'd gone back forty years and was in the old home. They're badly off that haven't a mother."

"Eh, dear, yes, poor things," Mrs. Tickle agreed, "and no wonder lots of 'em miss their way. Not but what there's mothers and mothers, mind you, for there's dozens i' this neighb'rhood 'at does no credit to t' name, and when a mother's a bad mother I'm downright sorry for t' childer. But I've noticed this,

'at barring one or two 'at ought to be in t' 'sylum even bad mothers is better nor none at all. There's a young woman in t' next street 'at goes by t' name o' Lady Peggy and picks up a living by doing what she shouldn't. She'd a father 'at meant well and tried 'is best, I daresay, but I feel sure someway 'at if 'er mother 'ad lived things 'ud ha' been diff'rent for t' poor lass."

Mr. Knox had found his opening and he went right in. From this point it was plain sailing.

"Yes, yes," he said, with a sigh that was only partly theatrical; "I know something about that. I lost my wife when we'd been married less than ten years. I never had but one child——"

Mrs. Tickle nodded.

"Sam oft talks about Miss Daisy," she said.

"Does he? Well, poor girl, she hardly knew her mother. I've had to be both father and mother to her since she was eight, and now she's twenty-three."

Mrs. Tickle's face shewed sympathy, but she shook her head at Mr. Knox's assertion.

"You'll ha' done your best, sir, I've no doubt, but she'll ha' known t' diff'rence if she hasn't let you see it, and it's much if you 'aven't missed your way ofter nor you think. Of course there is odd men, I suppose, 'at frames middling, but if you'll forgive me saying so, you don't look like a man 'at 'ud be comfortable i' petticoats. Nature's nature, and it isn't nature for a man to be a mother. Goodwill goes a long way, but I've 'ad a deal of experience, and when it comes to dealing wi' childer men's naught much better nor big babies themselves. I've naught again 'em, mind you, but when they try to tackle jobs 'at the Lord never

meant 'em to 'andle you mustn't be capped if t' wool gets ravelled."

Mr. Knox made a wry face, which was wholly theatrical this time and designed to encourage Mrs. Tickle, who proceeded—

"I've known men try it on, but if you've managed to satisfy yourself let alone them 'at looks on and says naught you're t' first I've come across, sir. It's wonderful what men can do, but it's a'most as wonderful what they can't. They can look after t' country and t' town council and things o' that sort, but I've never known one yet 'at could look after 'imself, let alone little 'uns. 'E's fair lost, a man is, if 'is collar stud falls between 'is shirt and 'is back, and makes as much fuss as a woman 'ud make if she'd spoiled a baking o' bread. But there! it doesn't seem me to be talking like this to a gentleman."

Mr. Knox was cute enough to realise that he had only to put in a word now and then to get all the help he sought. It amused him therefore to stand upon his defence.

"I've not done so bad with Daisy," he said. "We got on famously when she was little. Of course now that she's got to be sort of boss——"

"You get worried," said Mrs. Tickle. "Now you see if t' poor girl 'ad 'ad a mother she'd never ha' got to be t' boss—not once in a 'underd times anyway. That shews you mis'andled t' job when she was little, and small blame to you. You were both to be pitied."

"Oh, well," said Mr. Knox, who felt that his value as a guardian was being depreciated too mercilessly, "things aren't as bad as all that, you know. There's been naught much to worry about so far, only——"

He halted, and the little word combined with the

little pause gave the show away, though Mrs. Tickle did not allow her face to say so.

"That's right enough," she said. "Women worries more nor men, but men never seem to see t' things they ought to worry about—things a woman 'ud sniff out before they came a'most. And if they do 'ave a bit o' bother wi' their women-folk they're like rats in a trap, most men, running round and round, scratching and whining and can't see a way out. They can't 'elp it, and you don't want to fret about it. The Lord gave you plenty, but 'e didn't give you woman's wit."

Mr. Knox tried to laugh lightly, and he came to the point.

"It's when they start courting," he said humorously, "that you feel you're short of something. Now there are two young men——"

Mrs. Tickle brought her hand down heavily on the arm of her chair.

"Nay," she said, "I might ha' known. You're like to be worried, 'cos of course you're just no use at all to t' girl."

"I don't know why I shouldn't be," said Mr. Knox. "We've been good chums, Daisy and me, but—it's funny how we've got on to this subject, Mrs. Tickle, but now that I've mentioned it I'll tell you that she seems to like the one I don't favour, and I'm sadly afraid sometimes she'll make a mistake. I wonder what you'd do, Mrs. Tickle, if you were in my place?"

Mrs. Tickle laid down her work.

"One of 'em's the gentleman at the shop, isn't 'e?" she asked.

Mr. Knox looked surprised and answered: "Yes,

and the other's a man we've known all our lives—a man I'm very fond of."

Mrs. Tickle shook her head slowly.

"It isn't who you're fond of," she said, "and it didn't ought to be. All you've got to do is to be sure which of t' two is t' best for 'er, and see 'at she gets fond of 'im."

"I'm sure enough in my own mind," he replied; "and it isn't Mr. Lycester, but she favours him; I'm sure she does."

"And 'ave you said aught to 'er about it?"

"Well," replied Mr. Knox, remembering several half-hearted attempts to discuss the matter with his daughter when he had been repulsed and compelled to retreat, "I've told her one or two plain facts that I thought she ought to know about him, but——"

Mrs. Tickle laughed.

"That's a man's way of going about it," she said, "and it's just as wrong as ever it can be when you're dealing wi' a young woman 'at thinks she's in love and knows better nor anybody else. Woman was made contrairy, right away from t' start. That's 'ow t' old serpent got 'is way in t' garden. 'E says, 'You 'aven't to 'ave that apple, you know,' and she says, 'Oh, 'aven't I?' There's naught puts a woman out of conceit wi' a man sooner nor another man always cracking 'im up. And contrairwise, there's naught makes 'er try to find t' good in a man like another man running 'im down. It's t' way we're made, only men's that blind they can't see it."

Mr. Knox pondered this explanation, and concluded there was something in it, and he went on to tell Mrs. Tickle a good many particulars about the rival suitors' qualities. He was surprised to find how his own

judgment clarified as he proceeded, and he became genuinely alarmed as he saw that it would be nothing less than a disaster if Daisy should marry Mr. Lycester.

Mrs. Tickle followed the narration carefully.

"I'm afraid you'll 'ave a bit o' bother," she said; "and it isn't a job 'at a man ought fairly to 'ave to deal wi'. 'Cos you see women's cuter nor men and it takes a woman to catch a woman, as you may say. You'll 'ave to be very careful, 'cos if she finds you out you'll be worse off nor if you'd left t' job alone, but if I was you——"

Mrs. Tickle leaned towards Mr. Knox, who bent forward to listen until the two heads almost touched. The advice she gave him was simple enough, yet it afforded him not only satisfaction but a good deal of amusement. At length he rose.

"Bless me," he said, "it's after half-past four and I've wasted your time for the best part of two hours. My train goes soon after five, so I must be off. We're staying at the seaside just now. You'll not say a word about my having called, will you?—nor this little lassie?"

"I'll talk to Cissie when you've gone, sir," said Mrs. Tickle. "You needn't fear 'at we shall let aught drop."

He patted the child on the head, and the mother accompanied him to the door.

"Your little girl looks only poorly," he said in a low tone.

"T' doctor's bothered about 'er," said Mrs. Tickle. "But, please God, we shall rear 'er yet. She's a marvel to what she was a month sin'." Then she paused as a light broke upon her. "It isn't you 'at's

been sending all these things from Simpsons', is it, sir? I thought wi' you saying 'at Sam 'ad mentioned wer names 'at 'appen——"

Mr. Knox was too old to blush and too wary to be off his guard.

"Goods from Simpsons'?" he said, shaking his head slowly. "It hasn't been me; I only wish it had. You must have more friends than you know of, Mrs. Tickle, and I should like to be another. Now if you'd let me send you——"

He saw by the look on Mrs. Tickle's face that he was making a mistake.

"Don't mention it, please, sir," she said. "We're getting on nicely, and I wouldn't ha' named it but we've wondered many a 'underd times. 'Owever, I thank 'im 'at put it into their 'earts, choose who it is. And I 'ope you'll get over your worries, sir."

Mr. Knox thought a good deal about Mrs. Tickle and her advice as the train sped on, and he formed a plan of campaign.

"I shall have to be as sly as a fox," he said, "or Daisy'll smell a rat. It's as Mrs. Tickle says—they're too quick-witted for men, are women."

"Sam," he said the next day, "I wonder if that child you send beef-tea to would care to have a handy little rocking-chair that's throwing about somewhere up at home—one Miss Daisy used to fancy when she was a youngster? If you think she'd like it I'll go round with you and see if I can put my hands on it. And she'd perhaps find a game useful to pass the time on. What have we got, think you, that she'd fancy?"

CHAPTER XII

CISSIE ENTERS FAIRYLAND.

MOTHER," said Louisa, "Number Seven's putting a veil over 'er best bonnet i' t' front o' t' glass i' t' chamber window."

"What!" Louisa's mother dropped the wet sheet into the tub of water and joined her daughter at the window, where both glued their noses to the pane and lifted their eyes upwards.

"An' that's Cissie wi' 'er red winter coat on, an' I'm blest if Sarah isn't getting into 'er brown ulster what 'er sister Polly gave. 'er t' last time she 'ad t' skyatics," said the older woman. "I wondered what was up when I saw 'er bankin' t' fire a bit sin'. Nip across, Louisa, an' ask 'er if she'll lend us t' loan of a peggy-stick, 'cos ours is short of a leg."

Louisa drew down the skin beneath her left eye and invited her mother to tell her if she saw any unnatural colour there, and added—

"Not me. I've been to Number Seven o' them errands afore. You can go yourself."

They went to the door instead and stood there as if they were in need of a breath of fresh air. Their sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and Sooty Bill, who was sitting on the step in the attitude he favoured when work was wanting or unattractive, desired to be

informed how often women rested from their labours in the course of a quarter-hour. Louisa's mother, with the corner of her eye on the door and window of No. 7, made an appropriate reply, and compliments were exchanged at a rapid rate.

"Toot—toot—too-o-o-t!" The horn of a motor-car, at present out of sight, shrieked and groaned like a duet between a steam siren and a cow in pain, and as Sam drove into the Row the children, who usually found the roadway a safe and quiet playground, retired precipitately to the sidewalk and stood with dirty thumbs pushed between dirty lips, staring at the phenomenon.

Nor were they the only spectators. Before the car had pulled up at the door of No. 7, almost every other door had its occupant, and Sooty Bill laughed aloud.

"You've a bit keener smell, lass, nor most of 'em," he shouted to Louisa's mother. "You got t' whiff o' t' stink-box when t' car must ha' been a mile off. If I'd a nose like that I'd let it out to t' Sanitary Department chap to find what's wrong wi' t' drains. You'd 'ave no 'casion to work."

There was a laugh at the woman's expense, but Louisa dug her elbow into her mother's side and bade her take no notice of the idleback.

Sam had descended, and the engine throbbed and panted as if impatient of delay, but the neighbours who had ventured into the roadway and taken up a position on two sides, just as if it had been a funeral, were not kept long in suspense, for Mrs. Tickle appeared with Cissie in less than a minute and locked the door behind her.

"You're doing it i' style, Sarah," Sooty called out. He had not troubled to rise nor to remove the pipe

from his mouth. "You can draw a bigger crowd nor a parson."

"'Appen so," snapped Mrs. Tickle. "And if anyone cares to take up a collection I 'ope it'll go to buying you a bit o' soap and bribing you to use it, Sooty. You'd none take cold this weather if you was careful."

The laugh was directed against Sooty this time, and Mrs. Tickle climbed into the car. It was high, with the door at the back, and she hoisted herself through the opening with difficulty, to the accompaniment of humorously encouraging remarks from the neighbours. She made no reply, but inwardly determined to be picked up on the main road on the next occasion.

Sam had already lifted Cissie in, and a young woman who was a stranger to Mrs. Tickle and to the crowd wrapped a rug round the child.

"Are you right, Gert?" Sam asked, as he closed the door, and the girl nodded. Then Sam mounted to his seat, set the siren and the cow free again, and moved off up the road. It was the most exciting, because the most unexpected and unusual thing that had happened in the Row since the memorable morning when the milkman's convalescent pony had struck work and left the milk-cans to empty their contents into the channels whilst it careered up the street in search of a larger liberty.

"That there lad 'at they've gotten to know 'as a chawfer's job," Louisa's mother explained to all and sundry, 'an' all I 'ope is 'at 'is master knows 'at 'e's ta'en t' car, for it 'ud be a sad job if owt was to 'appen Sarah."

The idea that retribution would be swift to follow on the heels of wrongdoing made an immediate appeal

to the others, who soon persuaded themselves, and were ready to assert positively, that no good could come to a young fellow who ran away with his master's property when his back was turned (envy, it may be noted, sometimes produces a bastard morality), and the forebodings respecting Mrs. Tickle's safe return were of the gloomiest character.

Meantime that lady, unconscious of these animadversions, was yielding herself to the thrilling novelty of the experience. She had donned, as we have seen, her best clothes for the occasion, and felt in somewhat of a Sabbath mood in consequence, but she was determined to enjoy herself even though her heart kept leaping into her mouth as Sam passed tramcars and turned corners at what seemed to her a reckless speed.

Cissie, in her winter coat of faded scarlet, whose glories were hidden and would in any case have been eclipsed by the rug of gorgeous tiger colours in which she was wrapped, nestled up to her mother and felt as safe as if the angels had had their arms about her. Excitement shone in her eyes and little quivers ran up and down her body, causing it to tingle deliciously. This was better than the switchback on which she had once ridden with Maud Annie; better than the rampant beasts which coursed round and round the wonderful organ with the trumpets when the "Tide" came to the Brickfields in the summer. Even Gertie's face relaxed as she looked across at the child, but she seldom spoke during the first part of the journey.

Tuesday afternoon was the shopkeepers' holiday, and it had been Daisy's idea that Sam should be allowed the use of the car on this occasion for his friends. Mr. Knox, pursuing the scheme that had been outlined for him by Mrs. Tickle and elaborating

it, had succeeded in stimulating his daughter's interest in the youth, for whom she still occasionally acted as fairy-godmother.

"He wants to save his money and not throw it away on old women and children that don't belong to him," he grumbled. "If he wants to be a philanthropist he must wait till he's made money"; whereupon Daisy lectured her father on the sin of choking generosity at its birth and painted a picture before her father's eyes of a noble boy building a career of usefulness on the solid foundation of self-sacrifice. Her eloquence did not convince her father, because he knew infinitely more about that than she did, but it convinced herself, which was much more to the point.

"That's a young woman's sentiment," Mr. Knox remarked coolly. "Bert's no opinion of Sam. You ask him and he'll tell you the same. I dropped him a hint of what the lad was doing and he called him a silly fool."

This was all part of the plan of campaign, and Mr. Knox got a tremendous amount of satisfaction out of it.

"Mr Lycester's nothing to do with it," said Daisy loftily. "I use my own judgment."

Daisy had not been to see Mrs. Tickle because she distrusted herself—she knew she would not be able to keep Sam's secret. Amateur theatricals were very much in Daisy's line, and she was considered one of the most conspicuous successes in the company of local Thespians, but in matters of everyday life she was not deceived as to her unfitness to play the part of a hypocrite; she had never been able to control her blushes, and her features were quick to give her away. So though she had wanted to go, and never more than

when her father's interest in Sam's protégés appeared to be cooling, she had felt that she must not. It was on their return from their holiday that she had suggested the excursion by car, and her father, after raising all sorts of ridiculous objections, which included an expressed opinion of Mr. Lycester's, that Sam would smash the whole bag o' tricks one of these days, had given a grudging consent. Daisy was disappointed in her father, whom she had always regarded as one of the most generous of men, and she saw in this new attitude a germ that might play havoc with her father's happiness and her own peace of mind. Her father must inevitably grow old, but he must not be allowed to become callous. Daisy determined to be firm with him as a daughter ought to be who stood in the place of a wife.

So the car rattled along—not too quickly, for Sam had charge of a precious freight, and was not going to take risks—and by-and-by the city was left behind. In a quarter-hour's time they reached open country, and Cissie gave an exclamation of delight as she saw a green valley below the road, with a river winding its crooked way between meadows and coppices and losing itself in the grey distance, where the spire of a church and the blurred outline of other buildings indicated a village.

The village was reached before the child had taken in the wonders of the landscape; it was left behind before she had realised how quaint and interesting it was; and they were crossing a narrow bridge that spanned the river. Sam stopped there a moment and she saw the dark waters pour over the weir and become foamy white; and beyond, gaily-coloured boats and canoes with rowers and paddlers in white shirt sleeves

and ladies with bright sunshades. Tall trees covered the steep banks on either side. Autumn had laid her hand upon them, and the greens had sobered, and with the russets and golden-browns were duplicating their splendours on the narrow bosom of the river. It was fairyland to the child—a scene compared to which the spurious glories of the picture palace made a sorry show, and she looked up into her mother's face and said nothing but felt inexpressibly happy.

"She's never seen aught o' t' sort before," Mrs. Tickle explained to Gertie, and Gertie's eyes shewed sympathy.

"Poor little thing," she said, and became warmer.

They went on. There were red rowan berries in the woods, and the thrushes were busy with them. Here and there a tiny cascade slid down the rocks and filled a narrow gulley with its silver waters. The rough loose walls were covered with fern and moss and lichen. Brake-fern, spotted and slashed with yellow, carpeted the woods. Jackdaws and rooks chattered and quarrelled by the roadside. Farther on the ferns spent themselves, and fallen leaves lay thick upon the ground, and then the wood itself ran out and there was open country again.

Another turn and another village—ever such a tiny one—and at the bottom of the hill a bridge and a gurgling stream, and a bank on which the gorse bushes had lit their golden candles. Swallows wheeled in the air, cattle munched in the pastures: in a field near the bridge some boys were playing cricket. Sam drew the car on to the grass by the side of the bridge and shut off the engine, and Cissie, looking round as he got down, saw him enter a cottage where, above the door, was the word "Teas" in large white letters.

All this was Daisy's idea, disapproved by her father as likely to turn poor people's heads; and the two half-crowns in Sam's pocket had come from Daisy's private purse. If she could have seen the party ten minutes later as it sat in the garden and feasted on bread as good as Mrs. Tickle's own, with country butter such as the Brickfields never knew, and eggs such as Brickfields hens could not have laid if they had put all their heart into it; if she could have seen how quickly the strawberry jam disappeared and how often the empty cups were passed up for tea and milk—if she could have seen all this she would have been justified in considering her money well spent and in treating the predictions of her untractable father with the contempt they deserved.

Gertie became very nearly genial, and whilst Sam took Cissie to see the flaming flowers on the hillside and to look for blackberries in the lane at the top, she talked with Mrs. Tickle and wondered if she might have found a friend. It was just ordinary conversation at first about nothing at all, but Mrs. Tickle got to understand how it was that Sam found the atmosphere of his home so cold.

"'E's a good-'earted lad, is Sam," said the older woman, as she saw him helping Cissie up the hill.

"Yes," said Gertie. "He's right enough as boys go, and I'll say one thing for him: he means to be kind and he isn't selfish, but he's a bit too interfering. Maybe it's because we never had any brothers that we don't get used to it. You see, Ellen and me are the sort that keep theirselves to theirselves and can't stand worriting. Sam's always worriting us—anyway he is me."

The girl's tone had become weary again, and her

eyes were fixed on the trees beyond the fields. Mrs. Tickle looked at her and thought what a pretty face it would have been if the care lines could have been smoothed out of the brow and the magic herb heart's-ease dropped into the fountain of her life. "She's supping sorrow o' some sort, poor lass," she thought, but she let nothing of this appear in her voice.

"You weren't reared i' this neighbourhood, I reckon," she said, "judging by t' way you talk, and 'appen Sam's a bit rougher nor what you've been used to. But I tell you 'ow I size 'im up. He's terrible cute, and if 'e thinks 'e can do a body a good turn 'e's same as 'e stands o' one foot waiting to be off on t' job. And as you say, 'e's kind, but I shouldn't 'ardly call 'im interfering."

Gertie hesitated.

"It's maybe my fault," she said slowly, "but I always feel he's in the way. When I'm a bit low-spirited he stares at me and won't leave me alone. He hasn't sense to see and say naught."

Tears had come into Gertie's eyes, but Mrs. Tickle pretended not to see them, and answered cheerfully—

"That's because 'e's a lad and you're a young woman and good-looking. Why, bless you, 'ow could 'e keep 'is eyes off you if 'e thinks you're i' trouble? If I was you I wouldn't let it worrit you, 'cos folks was never meant to keep theirselves to theirselves. I've 'ad my share o' trouble, but if I hadn't ha' been able to talk about both my joys and my sorrows a bit I might as well ha' been caged up, same as t' wild beasts i' Wombwells."

"People are built different ways," Gertie said. "Ellen isn't as bad as me, I know, but she hasn't gone through what I have; though I oughtn't to have

said that," she added quickly, with an apprehensive look at her companion. "I prefer to keep my joys, which are few enough, and my sorrows, which are never to seek, to myself."

Mrs. Tickle's face saddened. Once or twice whilst the girl had been speaking she had felt a sense of impatience, but this weary, old-woman's air, this bitterness, this note of hopelessness, called not for indignation, but for sympathy.

"You're mista'en, my lass," she said. "It's easy to see 'at you're 'ugging a trouble o' some sort, and I don't ask to know aught about it. But I've lived a deal longer nor you, and you can take it from me 'at it's same wi' troubles as it is wi' bundles—you can 'ug 'em yourself till you're fair spent. You want to find someb'dy you can trust and let 'em take 'old wi' you. It 'ud ease 'alf t' load, you'd see, right off."

"There's nobody I can tell," said the girl in a low voice. "I think if I could tell anybody it would be you, though I never saw you before in my life. I can't tell Ellen—it 'ud only make her miserable. I—I daren't tell."

"I've never seen t' road yet," remarked Mrs. Tickle, "'at there wasn't a way out of if it was only t' same 'at you went in by. I aren't one myself 'at never rests till they've ferreted out someb'dy else's secret, and what you've said is as safe wi' me, my lass, as if you'd told it to yon beck. I don't say 'at you 'aven't made me curious, 'cos I can't 'elp thinking 'at things mayn't be as bad as you take 'em to be, and two 'eads is oft better nor one. But I shall say naught to you if you say naught to me. If ever I can 'elp you, you know where I live—No. 7. But there's one thing you want to remember. I don't

reckon to be one-o' t' goody-goodies, but I could find you where it says 'at if you cast your burden on the Lord 'E'll sustain you, and there'd be no 'arm in telling 'Im all about it anyway."

"I'm tired of praying," said Gertie listlessly. "It's talking to a stone wall."

"We build wer own walls," said Mrs. Tickle, with a note of sharpness. "You've walled yourself round, lass, till neither God nor man can 'elp you, and t' first thing you've got to do is to rive that wall down."

Mrs. Tickle's lips tightened and Gertie looked at her in astonishment. The older woman did not avoid her gaze. On the contrary, she fixed her eyes on the girl's and continued—

"It's 'appen someb'dy else's fault 'at you're where you are, but it's your own fault 'at you double-bolt t' door on t' inside, and you'll never get out while you keep 'em there. You want to shove t' bars back."

She closed her lips again and nodded, as much as to say, "So just think that over," and as if the words had been spoken Gertie replied almost meekly—

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Tickle. I wish I was dead sometimes, but I've been brought up religious, and I don't know that that would end it."

They went back another way—a way that was without attractions. The landscape was bleak and bare; the villages monotonously grey and uninteresting, mere clusters of houses that had grown up around the big factories that smoked in their midst. Cissie leaned against her mother and closed her eyes.

Sam put them down in the main road not far from Brick Row, and Mrs. Tickle took the child's hand in her own.

“It’s been grand, love, ’asn’t it?” she said. “You must say ‘Thank you’ to Sam and Miss Daisy.”

Cissie lifted up her face and Sam kissed it, with the horrible consciousness that Gertie (to say nothing of a streetful of people) was watching him. Then he climbed up again and waved an adieu.

Brick Row was full of the odour of fish and chips when they entered it. The three restaurants were all busy and children were sitting on the curb inhaling the delicious perfume and hoping against hope that some benevolent purchaser would drop a few chips into their laps in passing. Mrs. Tickle’s face lit up as she greeted them all.

“Eh, but it’s nice to be ’ome again,” she said. “It beats t’ country, does this.”

Cissie thought so too. She had no desire to live in fairyland; it was too unreal; there was nothing home-like about it; the people belonged to another world—a foreign world, prettier, but still foreign. She was content to treat it as a memory.

So she went to bed and dreamed that a huge bush was growing in the middle of Brick Row and that the girls and boys of her acquaintance were gathered round it. Sam was in the midst of the group in his light dustcoat and chauffeur’s cap, and he stretched out his hand towards the bush. Instantly it sparkled with lamps in which little golden flames appeared, and the children shouted with glee. They shouted without restraint, as was the custom in the Brickfields, and so loudly that Cissie woke to find the dawn creeping over the roofs across the way and Maud Annie asleep at her side.

CHAPTER XIII

SERGEANT SMITH MAKES UP HIS MIND TO MARRY.

FRIDAY in the Brickfields area was a veritable Feast of St. Fanny to half the population. St. Fanny, it will be remembered, was a notable housewife whose abode was a temple of neatness, and though the residents had never heard of the lady they had a tradition that their houses must be cleaned, their windows washed and their grates blacklead on Fridays, and that nothing must be allowed to interfere with the custom. Wash days and baking days were, within narrow limits, movable feasts, but the connection between Fridays and "fettling" was rigorous as that which binds the tides to the moon. The other half of the population honoured the feast in the breach, being too busy with the worship of Bacchus, or too broken-spirited and unambitious to care anything about St. Fanny or what she stood for.

Mrs. Tickle, because she was an early riser, and even more because she worshipped at the shrine of St. Fanny to a certain extent on every working day, usually got through her Friday duties two full hours before the quickest of her neighbours, and was ready to sit down to her knitting at three o'clock. She had done so one blustering afternoon in early November, and was settling herself for an hour's rest and quiet before Cissie should come in from school when she

again became conscious by that uncanny and unaccountable sense of hers that someone was coming.

There was no stranger on the "ribs" this time, perhaps because they were too brightly polished to give one a foothold, but Mrs. Tickle's premonitions were more reliable than her fire-bars, and if she had been able to see round the corner of the road at that moment she would have known who her visitor was to be.

The group of unemployables who had their backs to the public-house wall a hundred yards away recognised the man as he passed and scowled upon him. He was well known to them all, for he had visited most of them in their homes at one time or other and pressed them to accompany him to the big building in the centre of the city, where he had shewn his friendly interest by introducing them to quite exalted personages. Thereafter they had enjoyed, or at any rate accepted, the hospitality of the State for a while, and had been and still remained ungrateful.

Sergeant Smith never even noticed the men, and the scowls were therefore lost upon him. His worried and dejected air did not escape the observation of his acquaintances, each of whom expressed a concise wish for the sergeant's future as the burly form disappeared round the corner.

"What the blankety blank 's t' matter wi' 'im?" said one.

"Took poison, like enough," said another, "'cos t' missus 'as given 'im another to nurse."

"'Im!" said Sooty Bill, who, being neighbour to Mrs. Tickle, was better informed. "'T' devil's 'ad more sense nor to get wed. 'E buried 'is sister what kept 'ouse for 'im less nor a month sin'."

“Well, I wish——”

When the sergeant turned into the Row he was observed by other eyes belonging to the gentler sex—eyes that were less hostile but certainly not friendly; and when he knocked at the door of No. 7 and let himself in, Nos. 2 to 6 on the other side assembled on the footpath to discuss with Nos. 1 to 5, who crossed over for the purpose, the probable object of the officer's visit. His bereavement had become known, and the women soon reached the conclusion that the sergeant's call was not unconnected with matrimony.

“It'll be a sad job for t' Row if we lose Sarah,” said No. 2 lugubriously, “but all t' same it 'ud be better nor 'avin' a cop livin' i' t' Row.”

The other women turned both contingencies over and examined them from every point of view, but they finally reached the almost unanimous conclusion that Mrs. Tickle had more sense than to tie herself up a second time, and that it was unthinkable that she should leave the Row to become wife to a policeman.

Meanwhile the sergeant had drawn his chair up to the fire.

“You don't mind if I have a pipeful, do you Sarah?” he asked, and his mournful tone caused Mrs. Tickle to look at him keenly. He saw neither the look nor the grim smile that followed it.

“Aye, light up,” replied Mrs. Tickle. “You can't 'ave a cheerful fire if t' chimney doesn't draw, and t' same way wi' men. You all look as foul as if you was sucking lemons till you turn yourselves into chimneys and blow smoke out o' your noses; and wearing blue coats wi' silver buttons gives no more sense apparently. I wonder what you'd think o' us women if we was to buy stuff for t' fun o' setting it

o' fire and watching it burn, same as childer at a bonfire."

The sergeant had no views on the subject and no time to waste on unprofitable argument.

"I've come to see you because I've something on my mind, Sarah," he said.

"That's easy seen," she replied, as her needles clicked busily. "It'll be three weeks come Sunday since you buried Ann Eliza, and you look as if you'd like to open t' grave and creep in alongside 'er. What's t' matter?"

Mr. Smith raised his foot and nearly got it on the fender, but an exclamation from Mrs. Tickle stopped him.

"No you don't. That was an 'abit Tickle 'ad, but I don't polish fenders to 'ave 'em made into 'assocks and scratched wi' men's boots. Cross one leg over t' other and lean back in your chair like a Christian."

The sergeant obeyed as meekly as a child.

"I could wish Ann Eliza had stayed," he remarked pettishly, as if that lady had gone to a better place on purpose to spite him. "It's all along of her not being here 'at I'm fair worried to death."

"Of course you are," replied Mrs. Tickle. "Why, bless you, a man without a woman, as I was saying to another party a month or two sin', is no more use nor a needle without an eye. What 'ave you thought o' doing?"

Mr. Smith uncrossed his legs and put his feet squarely on the hearthrug as he replied with a note of defiance and a deepening scowl—

"I've thought of getting wed; that's what I've thought."

Mrs. Tickle laughed merrily.

"Don't talk i' that way, same as you was forced. There's no law to make folks wed 'at I know on, so you've no 'casion to carry on as if you'd been ordered to take laud'num. But so long as you aren't thinking o' wedding me I don't know 'at you could do better."

"Wedding you?" The sergeant removed his pipe and stared at his hostess with half-opened mouth. The scowl left his brow and was succeeded by puckers that seemed to indicate that his mind was interrogating a new suggestion. "Why, I never once gave you a thought, Sarah."

"Then don't begin," replied Mrs. Tickle, imperturbably. "I've 'ad my 'ead in t' noose once and I'm willing to give other bodies a chance. Turn and turn about, I say, when there's so many waiting. 'Owever, it was best to get that out o' t' road. What was it you wanted me to do, like?"

"I want a bit of advice," said the sergeant, "and I hope you'll treat it serious, Sarah, for when a man's got to my years getting wed is no laughing matter, I can tell you. But I'm losing weight and sleep with dwelling on it, and I'm same as a donkey between two bundles of hay, as t' saying is."

"It's well you say it yourself," snapped Mrs. Tickle. "But donkey or no donkey, you've got to make your mind up. I thought old Mrs. Broadbent was doing for you."

The sergeant made a gesture of impatience.

"Doing for me! If that woman stops another month you'll see me in a strait waistcoat. She is doing for me. Her tongue clatters away same as if it went by clockwork, and as for being masterful she orders me about more these three weeks than Ann Eliza did in twenty years. I scarce dare open my lips."

"Eh, dear," commented Mrs. Tickle, "and you a p'liceman, too. Why don't you shift 'er if she's that bad and get someone else?"

The sergeant shook his head.

"It would take a steam navvy to shift her. She talks as if she was settled till death us do part and me to go first. The tales she can tell of middle-aged men of my build 'at's gone as sudden as the crack o' doom is same as pouring cold water down your spine. There isn't a night passes but she wants to know if I've made my will. But it isn't just her neither."

Mrs. Tickle plied her needles busily, but did not remove her eyes from his face. "Go on," she said; "let's have it all, and then we know where we are."

"Sarah," said the unhappy man, looking into his friend's eyes almost pathetically, "for a man 'at's reckoned smart in his own line it's no credit to have lived over forty years and gone about with his eyes shut. That's what I've done. I didn't know there was as many single women in t' city scrambling for husbands as what lives within a few hundred yards of me."

Mrs. Tickle chuckled. "Nay for sure," she said. "And they're worrying you?"

"They're worse than flies over a midden," he replied innocently, and Mrs. Tickle laughed outright.

"You're calling yourself funny names this afternoon, Frank," she commented. "I'd say 'treacle' if I was you; it 'ud sound nicer."

"You can have it as you like," was the reply. "Another thing that I used to think was that women waited while they were asked. These brazen hus-sies ——"

"Tut tut," interrupted Mrs. Tickle, "don't you go

and lose your temper over t' job 'cos there's a bit o' competition for you. Women soon knows when a man's on t' look out for a mate, and it's only friendly to let you see what there is to pick from. T' neighbourhood's same as a shop—it sees what you're wanting and puts t' goods in t' window. You ought to be pleased i'stead o' grumbling. It's for all t' world like playing kissing-ring wi' you in t' middle and a score o' young women standing round to see who's going to be picked."

"Don't talk a lot o' daft nonsense, Sarah," growled the sergeant. "I never did play kissing-ring and I'm too old to begin, and I can't stand these brazen ways that women have now-a-days."

"Well," said Mrs. Tickle, "we've no 'casion to argue whether women is worse now nor they used to be, but I know I gave Tickle what you might call a 'elping 'and, and I'm not ashamed to say it. And as for 'em buzzing round you, there's a deal o' conceit i' men and it doesn't follow 'cos a woman looks at you, or a streetful o' women, 'at they're falling over one another to get you to wed 'em. It might be a smut on your nose 'at they're smiling at."

The sergeant roused himself.

"It isn't a smut on my nose when one of 'em calls round to say that they've got a new talking-machine and will I step across and hear it play. It isn't a smut on my nose when every man I've ever noddod to that has a grown-up daughter or a maiden aunt or some widow or other that he helps to keep out of t' work house asks me to tea and manages to have 'em there, smirking at me across t' table. I'd carry a smut on each side of my nose and thankful if that was all."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Tickle soothingly, "it's something to be proud of when all's said and done 'at you're that much in demand, and I'm blest if I can see what it is 'at takes their fancy. But then them 'at's been bitten looks shy at all dogs, and I'm naught to go by. T' quickest way to stop 'em is to pick a wife as soon as you can, and then t' tea-parties and t' gramophone 'll give you no more trouble."

"Aye, that's easily said," replied the sergeant gloomily, "but what bothers me is who I'm to pick."

"Gracious me, man!" returned Mrs. Tickle; "you 'aven't come to get me to pick for you, 'ave you? Is there nob'dy you favour or are you going to put 'em all in a brantub and take t' first you come at?"

"There's two or three I've turned over in my mind," said the sergeant "but I can't come to any conclusion about 'em. There's Eli Robinson's lass."

"Aye, I might ha' known." Mrs. Tickle dropped her knitting and spoke caustically. "A young fly-bisky 'at could easy be your daughter, 'at puts every penny she earns on 'er 'ead and 'er back, same as bait to catch silly fish. My sister Polly knows 'er well. That's number one, is it? Go on."

"I was doubtful that she might be a bit free wi' t' purse," said the sergeant, "but she's nice looking and always pleasant."

"Sam Munday 'll bring you a doll from t' shop 'at's as good looking as Nell Robi'son," remarked Mrs. Tickle, "wi' t' same sort o' yellow 'air, and 'll make you as good a wife near-'and. But let's get on to t' others."

"There's Jane Butler down at the 'Sun.' She'll be somewhere about my own age, and can cook a steak

to beat all I've ever put a fork into. She's a good natured sort, but plain featured."

"Well," said Mrs. Tickle, "that's naught again' 'er. I was always one 'at liked pictures to match in a 'ouse, but we don't all think alike. I can't say 'at I know t' lady, but I've 'eard Sam speak of 'er. She's Mr. Knox's sister-i'-law."

"Is she?" replied the sergeant thoughtfully. "That 'ud go in her favour then. And I daresay she'll have a bit saved up, will Jane, for she's a careful sort, and she's been yonder a long time."

"I see," commented Mrs. Tickle. "So if t' picture wasn't up to much t' gold frame might be worth 'avin. And is she one 'at's been bidding for you?"

Mrs. Tickle's tone was more caustic than ever, but Mr. Smith was too absorbed to notice this, and he replied—

"She's always very pleasant-spoken and ——"

"Never mind," interrupted Mrs. Tickle impatiently; "let's go on to t' next."

The sergeant blew his nose rather violently and wasted time before replying.

"There's a young woman that Sam lives with, name of Ellen Mellor, seems a tidy body—a bit on t' quiet side, maybe, but that's a good fault. I think she'd do nicely, but there's her sister. I couldn't do with two, and it isn't fair that I should be asked. Then there's another thing. By what Sam says she's devilish religious, but she'd happen mend o' that once she was wed."

"There's naught more likely," said Mrs. Tickle with emphasis. "If that doesn't cure 'er you can give 'er up as 'opeless. And as for t' sister you'd 'ave to name it of course 'at a man 'at's starting to manage

women at your time o' life 'll find 'is 'ands full wi' one. They aren't same as Siamese twins, and you'd find they come apart wi' a bit o' pressure 'appen. 'Ow many more is there on t' list?"

"I thought three was enough to begin with," replied the sergeant.

"Then let's see," said Mrs. Tickle, checking them off with her fingers, "we've got t' world—that's Nell Robi'son; t' flesh—that's Jane what's-er-name; and t' devil—that's Ellen Mellor; asking 'er pardon. And you want me to tell you what I think, do you?"

The man nodded.

Mrs. Tickle looked at him with hard eyes; then picked up her knitting and emptied a needle before replying:

"I could find it in my heart to give you t' rough edge o' my tongue, Frank. You're like all t' rest o' men, choke full o' your own importance, and years makes you no wiser. But why should I lose my temper over you? You're all childer and naught else, and you need a woman to look after you and keep you out o' mischief; someb'dy you can run and cry to when you've a pain under your belt and 'at 'll tell you you aren't going to die if you get t' influenzy and has to go to bed for a day or two. You're all childer and never grow up, and that's why women goes soft over you and lets you 'ave your own way.

"All t' same it's a pity you can't 'ave a bit o' sense when it comes to picking a wife, but t' wisest man 'at ever lived, and that was Solomon if you go by t' Bible, fell over that stool. You've shewn a bit o' gumption i' coming to me, but I doubt you'll go your own way at t' finish."

The sergeant puffed at his pipe and fixed his eyes on the mantelpiece and Mrs. Tickle continued.

"You want someb'dy 'at 'll do for you and keep t' 'ouse as Ann Eliza kept it and yond frowzy-topping 'll always want to be at t' Pictures and shewing 'erself off in t' park o' band nights. I should cross 'er off t' list and all like 'er. You'd soon lose patience wi' puff-boxes and stockings 'at might ha' been made out o' veils, but you couldn't swop 'er for a better, think on, and you'd 'ave to chew what you'd cooked whether it gave you t' 'eart-burn or no.

"If I was you I'd try number two, but I wouldn't build on it. I don't know t' woman, but I've an idea 'at she'll ha' lived long enough to know when she's well off, and I shouldn't blame 'er if she wasn't for starting to 'ug trouble at 'er time o' life."

"Who's asking her to hug trouble?" asked the sergeant with some spirit. "You know I should make her no bother."

"There's always bother where there's men," replied Mrs. Tickle, "same as there is where there's childer. Some men makes trouble and some doesn't, but it always breaks out where they are, same as mumps and measles wi' childer, and when folks 'as lived comfortable to 'er time o' life they know better nor to ask for it."

"What about Ellen Mellor then?" asked the sergeant. "It'll have to be one of 'em. Somebody's got to come and turn yon old besom out."

"Listen to 'im!" said Mrs. Tickle, addressing an imaginary audience. "'e 'asn't pluck enough to do 'is own dirty work, but must find a woman to do it for 'im. I'd be ashamed o' myself. I warrant any

one o' t' three 'ud manage that job for you i' quick-sticks.

"As for Ellen Mellor, all I know about 'er is 'at 'er religion's desperate dark-coloured, but if she was to wed you it 'ud 'ave to serve for two and that 'ud thin it out a bit. I suppose you couldn't wait till you found someb'dy you could love?"

"Love!" said Mr. Smith in a horrified voice. "I wonder what you'll say next, Sarah. Nonsense of that sort has been knocked out of me this thirty year."

Mrs. Tickle sniffed the air.

"I'm capped you don't toss for it," she said. "I could almost 'ope they'll none of 'em 'ave you."

The sergeant smiled contentedly and pushed back his chair. The smile spread as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and Mrs. Tickle's choler rose.

"Oh, of course you've only to blow your whistle and they'll come swarming after you same as t' rats followed t' piper i' Cissie's picture book. And t' vexing part is 'at it's true, for there's 'underds o' women waiting like plums in a basket for t' first man 'at 'll put 'em to 'is mouth. But t' best bide a bit o' getting and isn't in a 'urry to leave t' tree. They're not all anxious to be gobbled up, Frank Smith. 'Owever, go fend for yourself, and we'll see what sort of a mess you make of it."

CHAPTER XIV.

CHRISTMAS DAY AT NO. 7.

SLEET and slush, slush and sleet, and a driving, whistling wind from the north. In the main roads of the city the snow-ploughs had been out, and deep embankments that had once been white and were now offensively black, lined the sides and formed impermanent glaciers that supplied the channels behind them with rivers of dirty water. The shops were closed and the streets comparatively silent. At intervals a cab splashed its way through the churned mixture of snow and filth, or a scarlet mail-cart pulled up to allow a waterproofed woe-begone postman to descend and wade down a side street with parcels in his numbed hands, dejection in his heart, and strong language on his lips. Objects fifty yards away were blurred like a badly-focussed photograph, and there was no distance at all—it was gone, lost, swallowed up with the sky itself by the relentless squall. Unfortunate pedestrians of the male sex stumbled along with bent heads, the collars of their overcoats turned above their ears, seeking to avoid the stinging blast and thinking hopefully, no doubt, of warm fires and good fare at the journey's end. Those of the gentler sex—let us hope heaven pitied them and shortened their journey, for umbrellas were worse than useless, and the rough wind had no mercy for the weak, and the

sleet stung like hot needles and found its way through the crevices of wrappings and the soles and uppers of boots as if it revelled in the sense of human discomfort and was paid to do the work of death.

Sam Munday forced his way forward and cared very little for the Arctic conditions. His boots were well coated with dubbing, and as long as his feet were dry the unpleasant experiences were of no consequence. True, his trousers were wet through below the knees, for his overcoat was short and would persist in blowing aside, but that was nothing. Sam knew that brown paper wrapped round his legs would enable him to dry his trousers before the fire in a few minutes. True, the water had collected in the brim of his felt hat and emptied itself down his neck as the result of a collision with a lamp-post which had stood stock still in his path as he went plunging along with his chin on his chest, but that again was a trifle, and from one point of view even a piece of good luck, for it could be turned to account later on and served up as a joke to make Cissie laugh.

Sam's hands were blue though they were thrust deep into his pockets, but they were not as blue as his nose, which had no hole to creep into for protection, and little streamlets were running down his cheeks and dropping off the end of his chin on to the new red tie with the green spots that he had bought the previous evening; but none of these things could destroy Sam's good humour, for after all it was Christmas morning—the very best and merriest Christmas morning Sam had ever known.

Sam, profiting nothing from past experience, collided with the woe-begone postman as he turned into Rose Street and received a hearty reprimand

condensed into two words of one syllable for his carelessness.

"Merry Christmas!" he shouted in reply. "Keep smiling, old Neb-cap, and don't say your prayers so loud."

Rose Street was keeping Christmas indoors. The public-house at the corner was brightly illuminated, for daylight had given up the struggle to enter the narrow street, and Sam saw the holly and the mistletoe and the warm glow from the fire, and knew where many of the Brickfields folk would find their only Christmas.

Ugh! what a puddle the roadway shewed. Six inches of thickened water into which Sam must step on tiptoe or his feet would be wet after all, for it was over the top of his boots. The sidewalks were not much better, but he kept as close as possible to the houses, where the slush was not so thick, and was thankful that the journey was nearly over.

"A merry Christmas" rang in his heart, but there were few evidences of it in Rose Street, where the festival was not observed to any great extent in the home. Sam looked in at every window as he passed, for he could hold his head up now, and he saddened a little at what he saw. It was what he had seen often enough before; what he had been used to all his days until these last life-transforming months—bare, flagged kitchens, coverless tables, furniture that no broker would have looked at, hearths littered with ashes, though here and there a fire shone brightly in pity-compelling contrast to other grates that were black or only faintly red on this wintry morning. Draggled women, ragged children, men that smoked and scowled, a babel of voices, dirty walls, dirty floors, dirty

language, on this morn when men and women in churches and happier homes were singing the praises of the Babe of Bethlehem Who came to make everything sweet and clean. Sam thanked his happy stars that these experiences were no longer his and hurried on.

Brick Row was better. Some of the houses shewed a sprig of holly; in one there was a dwarfed and hungry-looking Christmas-tree; in another there were gay decorations of coloured paper, and a child was sitting on the rug before the fire hugging a new dolly to her breast and crooning a song.

Suddenly a slight girlish figure emerged from the little shop where Mrs. Grange dispensed sweets and confectionery, and ran lightly in Sam's direction. Her head and shoulders were protected by a large shawl in which her arms were imprisoned, and though he could not see her face, for she was bending to the storm, it was unmistakably Lady Peggy's form. Sam was on the other side of the road, and as he came near he saw a foot extended from Sooty Bill's doorway, and the next moment the girl was tripped into the deep slush, where she lay with her parcel of small delicacies burst and its contents scattered.

Sam's blood boiled. He liked a joke himself, but this was a mean and dirty trick that called for vengeance. He was encumbered with a big parcel in a brown paper wrapper that he had been carrying underneath his overcoat, but one of the passages that led to the court at the back stood conveniently near, and he dropped the package there and hastened across the road.

Lady Peggy had risen to her knees and was evidently dazed, and Sooty was standing over her professing a concern that his grinning countenance belied. Sam

saw he was drunk, but did not count that as an excuse, and taking off his wet cap and using it as a weapon he struck the sweep upon the face with all the strength he could muster. Then, as the man recoiled before the unexpected blow, he bent his head, and butting him in a tender spot sent him into the slush to share Lady Peggy's experience.

So far not a word had been spoken, but if hot language could have thawed the snow, that part of the roadway ought to have been cleared and dry in the next two minutes. Sooty's expressions were not choice, but they were rivalled by Lady Peggy's, who was recovering her senses, and despite the sleet every doorway soon had its interested occupant.

Sam had kept silent. He was breathing hard through his nose, for his teeth were clenched and he stood in the attitude of battle. He quite expected a renewal of hostilities, for though Sooty was not quite steady on his legs, and was known to be much more ready to administer punishment to his wife and children than to sturdy young fellows like Sam, he was not likely to overlook an insult that had left him horribly uncomfortable. The war ended, however, in words and promises, for the door of No. 7 opened, and Mrs. Tickle, recognising the actors in the comedy, bade both Lady Peggy and Sam come inside, and recommended Sooty to get into the house and his Sunday clothes without delay.

The blinds had been drawn at No. 7, for the kitchen was decorated and Mrs. Tickle was ashamed to parade its magnificence before the eyes of her less fortunate neighbours, and it was not until Lady Peggy's voice had reached her ears that she had taken any notice of the disturbance.

Lady Peggy was quivering with excitement and passion, and Maud Annie took her into the scullery to be wiped down, whilst Mrs. Tickle turned her attention to Sam, who was shaking himself in the entry. No sooner did he put his head in at the inner door than Cissie shrieked and Thomas began to laugh immoderately.

Sam's face was a picture in black and white, and Mrs. Tickle took down the mirror from the wall and held it before him. Then Sam laughed, and Cissie laughed too, and Maud Annie and Lady Peggy, coming to the door of the scullery to see what the noise was about, caught the contagion of laughter.

"You'd do to let t' New Year in," said Mrs. Tickle, whose hands were on her hips and whose face had not got beyond a huge smile. "Billy's waistcoat 'll ha' lost so much soot 'at 'e'll 'ardly own it if 'e takes it off."

It was now Sam's turn to go into the scullery, and when he came out again with shining face and hair that stood straight up and refused to follow the direction of a comb, he found Lady Peggy in one of Maud Annie's skirts and a more equable frame of mind.

"Now 'at you're 'ere you may as well stay and 'ave a bit o' dinner wi' us," Mrs. Tickle was saying; and Sam saw Maud Annie cast down her eyes and Thomas indulge in a scowl.

Lady Peggy shook her head. She could speak softly and pleasantly when she chose—it was part, alas! of her stock-in-trade—and it was in an almost plaintive voice that she replied that she must go. She sighed as she glanced round the comfortable kitchen, and her eyes became sad. Then she reeled, and Mrs. Tickle caught her in her arms as she fainted.

"That settles it," said Mrs. Tickle. "Reach that ginger wine down, lass."

Maud Annie obeyed, and helped her mother to unhook the neck of Lady Peggy's blouse and to force some of the stimulant down her throat, and before long the colour returned to the girl's cheeks and she raised herself.

"It's my head," she said. "I hurt it when I fell, and it's made me dizzy."

"You'll stop where you are," said Mrs. Tickle authoritatively, "and Thomas 'll put 'is boots on and run round and tell 'em."

It was Sam, however, who undertook the errand, because, being wet already, it would do him no harm to be still wetter, and when he returned his overcoat was conveyed carefully into the little scullery and hung over a clothes-horse to dry, and Maud Annie, without a word of complaint, mopped up the pool of water in the entry, though Sam struggled to prevent her, and was only held back by the threat of the wet floor-cloth.

How they laughed when Sam, having wrapped brown paper round his legs, stood before the blazing fire to dry his trousers! What fun they made of him as the steam came out in volumes and was licked up by the flames and sent to join the smoke in the chimney! Cissie said that she expected to see him boil over every minute, which led Thomas to christen him Captain Kettle.

Sam laughed, and sat down beside Lady Peggy, who was leaning back in the arm-chair looking white and depressed, but who whispered to him that it was like a bit of heaven to be in a home of that kind. It may have been the fire that did it, for the flames were leaping towards the chimney and filling the room with

a golden glow; or it may have been the holly with the bright red berries that lay across the top of the picture frames and in a thick cluster over the door; or the plants that made a brave show in the window; or the mahogany drawers that shone until you could see your face in them; or the table, with its cloth of spotless white; or the sprig of mistletoe suspended from the gas pendant, which was covered all its length with frills of coloured paper. That was Maud Annie's work, and the mistletoe overhung the middle of the table—a ridiculous position, as Sam realised straight away, especially as there was not another sprig to be seen.

Anyhow, there it was, not heaven, of course, but the homeliest, cosiest, happiest scene you could imagine, and when you remember that there were homes by the score, and even by the hundred, near at hand where there was no golden glow, and no holly and mistletoe, and no snowy cloth around which happy, hearty people were to gather, you can understand why Mrs. Tickle drew the blind and lit the gas an hour or two before there was any absolute necessity for doing so.

Then, just when the smell from the oven was becoming positively ravishing, the door opened again, and Mr. Long stepped in and shook himself in the entry as Sam had done, only not so vigorously, for he was a feeble old man, and besides he was not very wet, as he had only had to cross the road. Sam looked at Maud Annie, who shrugged her shoulders, and Thomas pulled a face and whistled a bar or two of "Auld Lang Syne," and even Cissie's face lost a little of its expression of quiet content, but Mrs. Tickle hastened to open the inner door and welcome the expected guest.

"Come in, Mr. Long," she said, "and welcome to our little party. I was just beginning to wonder if I should 'ave to get our Thomas to nip across and see if you'd forgotten us, for I'm a poor judge if t' joint isn't just done to a turn."

Maud Annie unbent and wished the old man a merry Christmas, and so did all the rest, and Mr. Long, after grunting awhile about the weather and the cold and the nonsense of talking about being merry to old sandwich-men like him, caught the glow of the fire and thawed a little.

It was an excellent dinner that Mrs. Tickle served up to them. The roast pork was Uncle Arthur's Christmas-box, and though crisp on the top, it was so deliciously tender underneath that even Mr. Long's tottering old stumps could deal with it satisfactorily. There was seasoning, too, besides the gravy, and potatoes baked in their skins and so hot that Thomas, whose mouth happened to be sore, spent time that he sadly grudged in blowing them. It was all a huge success, like the plum pudding that followed it, and though nobody returned thanks it is quite certain that everybody was thankful.

After dinner the invited guests had to see the presents distributed, for Santa Claus is much too busy filling stockings in Suburbia to find his way down the chimney pots in the Brickfields, and if he should do so it would be a profitless journey, for the children there are much too old and sophisticated to believe in such nocturnal visits, and many of them dispense altogether with the luxury of stockings. Lady Peggy and Sam examined every article and set the seal of their approval upon it, though the gifts were quite inexpensive and useful rather than ornamental.

There was even an ounce of tobacco for Mr. Long and a new clay pipe, which the old man received with a grunt of thanks that stifled the protest he had begun against sinful extravagance, and he at once settled down to enjoy his burnt offering in the chimney corner.

Then there came the crowning surprise when Cissie opened the drawer in the dresser and brought out a parcel for Sam. What a big parcel it was!—why, the drawer had had to be emptied before it could be hidden there—and Sam was very red as he untied the string, whilst the others stood around and watched him. Untied it? Tried to untie it, I should say, for Thomas had tied a knot at every crossing, and Maud Annie would not allow the use of a pocket-knife, because string was scarce and economy a virtue.

So Sam used his nails and his teeth, and by-and-by the string was loose; but paper after paper had to be removed and Cissie had hurt herself with laughing at the simple age-worn joke before the last wrapper was reached and Sam saw the warm woollen gloves that were to be his. They fitted perfectly—even Mr. Long admitted that; though he could not help wondering what the world was coming to when healthy young animals like Sam couldn't "bide a bit o' cold" but must be wrapped up "like a watter-pipe again a wall i' frosty weather." It had not been so in his young days.

Nobody minded him, however, and he was completely forgotten when Sam, pretending to go to the door to see what the weather was like, fetched his parcel from its hiding place on the stairs. Everybody was astonished, of course, though Cissie and her mother had seen him put it there, and Maud Annie had stumbled over it as she came from the bedroom; and

when it was opened out Cissie could scarcely contain herself.

Mrs. Tickle's face flushed with pleasure as she tried on the white apron that covered her from neck to foot, though she declared it was too grand by half, and she would never dare to wear it. Sam scouted the notion. He knew that his gift was the very latest thing in aprons, for was it not an exact copy of the one worn by the smart young housemaid at "the Poplars," even to the tricky little bow at the throat and those wonderful erections over the shoulders? What was good enough for the housemaid was not too good for Mrs. Tickle.

There were two hatpins for Maud Annie and a neat little brooch—all much too simple for Sam's taste, but Miss Daisy had been taken into his confidence in this matter, and there could be no appeal against her decision. He had been half afraid that Maud Annie would be disappointed, and was relieved when he saw how much she liked them.

There was a drawing-board for Thomas, and the boy's eyes sparkled when he saw it, so that Sam felt repaid for his aching arm; and there was a book of fables for Cissie—a marvellous book with illustrations on every page—which had cost so much money that Sam had been fain to remove and burn the paper cover where the secret was given away. Cissie hugged him for it and gave him a kiss without a thought of the subterfuge of mistletoe.

Nor was that all. Sam produced a cardboard box and triumphantly drew forth a tongue that Mr. Knox had sent and a cake that Miss Daisy had iced with her own hands and which was studded with little silver balls that Thomas mistook for pills, and with sugar-

plums in green and gold and red—as wonderful a cake as Brick Row had ever known.

Mrs. Tickle's face beamed with delight, but all at once a shadow came over it.

“Now let's put 'em all out o' t' sight,” she said, “chance any o' t' neighbours comes in. I fair shame for Peggy to 'ave seen us wi' all these grand things and us going on like childer over 'em. It's nice to 'ave friends 'at's kind to us, but I couldn't like Louisa or any of 'em to come across and see what we've got. Poor things! I 'ardly bide to think o' them 'at can barely scrape together a bit o' fire and a bite o' bread.”

Lady Peggy's face saddened. It was a thin, delicate-looking face on which emotions played like cloud-shadows, and which held no secrets.

“It isn't your presents I grudge you,” she said. “Money comes free enough sometimes, and I get my share of it. I daresay I live as well as you most days; but there's other things——”

She broke off and looked at Mrs. Tickle, and a harder light came into her eyes.

“Why did God take my mother from me?” she asked; “and leave me to be thrown on t' street?”

“Nay, lass,” said Mrs. Tickle. “Don't ask me. 'E'll tell you 'imself one o' these days and it's beyond me. I wish sometimes I was religious so 'at I could 'appen understand these things, but I shouldn't like to say myself 'at 'E'd aught to do wi' it.”

Lady Peggy turned away and went over to the hearth, where she stood looking into the fire, and Maud Annie, in order to divert the conversation into other channels, said:

“We might have stolen t' presents to hear mother talk,” and she gathered up some of the gifts and

prepared to take them upstairs. "That's what comes o' living in t' Brickfields. It won't fill them 'at's hungry for us to go empty."

"No more it will," said her mother, "and it won't fill 'em to be sorry for 'em, but now 'at we've got this grand cake o' Miss Daisy's we can spare one o' my spice loaves nicely, and Thomas shall nip across to Sooty's, where there's five of 'em 'at'll be glad of a bite. We shall never miss it and it'll be a bit o' Christmas for 'em."

"'E's a bad lot, is Sooty," remarked Mr. Long, who had shewn no interest in Sam's parcel but was roused by any remark that had reference to food; "and 'is missus is a'most as bad—a shiftless slut 'at doesn't deserve to be 'elped. It's much if their childer ever get a sight o' t' cake. Isn't there them 'at keeps theirselves decent if you 'ave to throw your stuff away?"

"Course there is," returned Mrs. Tickle smartly. "One of 'em's sitting i' that chair smoking 'is pipe. But I don't ask t' sparrows for their characters afore I throw 'em t' crumbs i' 'ard weather, and if we can't 'elp all we could like we can 'elp them 'at needs it t' most."

"They'll eat it themselves you'll see," suggested Thomas.

Mrs. Tickle closed her mouth tightly and said nothing but fetched the loaf and laid it on the dresser.

"I'll see they don't," she said as she cut it into several pieces. "I'll see t' childer line their little insides with it, never fear. You needn't get your cap, Thomas. I'll slip across myself."

Maud Annie raised her eyebrows, and her mother saw her.

"It's Christmas, and you never lose naught by doing a kindness, Maud Annie," she said.

When the tea-things had been cleared away Lady Peggy rose. In her eyes there was a look that was half-shy, half-defiant.

"I must go now," she said. "Thank you ail for your kindness."

"Nay, child, not on a night like this," said Mrs. Tickle, into whose eyes there crept an unwonted moisture.

"Aye, this or any other," said the girl savagely; and Mrs. Tickle made no further protest.

When she was gone they all sat round the table and played "Snap" with the new cards that Sam had brought from the shop—all, that is, except Mr. Long, who re-charged his pipe and held out his worn hands to the flames.

What fun they had! and what mistakes Mrs. Tickle and Sam made! It was natural enough for Mrs. Tickle to be at fault, for she laughed and perspired so much that her spectacles steamed and shook upon her nose until they were of no more use than frosted glass, but there was no such excuse for Sam, whose eyesight was good enough on ordinary days and whose wits were as alert and nimble as a squirrel in ordinary company. To-day he made the most extraordinary blunders and failed to recognise the policeman on Cissie's pile, which might just as well have been the clown for all the notice he took of it, so that her heap grew big as his dwindled to nothing, and it had to be admitted that the Christmas fare had made his brain as lazy as a lap-dog.

It was ten o'clock when Mr. Long knocked the ashes out of his pipe and said he must be going. Sam got

up too and put on his overcoat and his new gloves. He turned as he stood at the open door and looked back upon the cheerful scene. The mistletoe still wasted its opportunities over the table, but Cissie, whose eyes were growing heavy, threw a kiss to supplement the one she had pressed upon his lips, and he went away happy. "A merry Christmas?" Why, yes—not half.

CHAPTER XV

NEW YEAR'S DAY AT "THE POPLARS."

MISS DAISY KNOX was decidedly out of humour and not quite so decidedly out of sorts. The meaning of that is that there was a difference of opinion between Daisy and her father as to what was the cause of the ill-humour. Mr. Knox attributed it to slight derangement of the liver, and expressed himself in a plain, straightforward Yorkshire way about cakes and puddings that had too many eggs in them, and fancy dishes that contained the Lord knew what, but undoubtedly the germs of biliousness and all sorts of sweet and coloured provocations to ill-health. Daisy turned up her nose at the explanation and asked her father why in that case he had remained so uniformly well and genial all the week, seeing that sage and onion, plum pudding, trifle, ripe Stilton, goose, jugged hare, muffins—Daisy stopped for want of breath rather than of matter—had lain down together as quietly as the lion and the lamb are going to do in the good days that are coming. The argument had been unanswerable in spite of Mr. Knox's protest that you can't compare an old crow with a canary, but the sense of victory had brought Daisy little satisfaction, and she had continued to be out of humour.

She was asking herself what it was all about as she

stood at the window in the drawing-room on the afternoon of New Year's Day. Suburbia from that vantage point looked as picturesque and attractive as the toy villages that could be bought at the Emporium, with trees and shrubs and palisades all complete. The houses were all alike in their unlikeness. They had roofs that sloped at all angles and windows that were placed freakishly where they were least expected, and little round fanlights over the doors, and embrasures filled with coloured glass on each side of the fireplace, and entrances that were hidden in mediaeval archways or approached by long flights of steps. Some of them had sunk gardens and some had rock gardens; some were three-storeyed and some two-storeyed, and others had so many quaint windows scattered up and down their deep roofs that nobody but a F.R.I.B.A. or a clairvoyant could tell how many storeys they had. They were all very interesting and unusual and a tribute to the versatility of an architect who had been perhaps a little mad, and when the casement curtains were drawn at night and the leaded lights were seen in all their glory, Suburbia would have delighted the heart of any child who ever revelled in a box of bricks.

Daisy was not a child, and she had got beyond the box of bricks stage and had cultivated, as we know, a taste for the severe in art, and would therefore have preferred a severer style of architecture with not so much gable and no stucco, but she could not deny that the outlook from the window was pleasing on this wintry day, when every roof was covered with snow, and snow lay deep upon the gardens and the curving roadway, and clung to every tiniest twig upon the trees and to every leaf upon the shrubs, and outlined the palisades that criss-crossed before every garden. She

did not deny it, but there was a look upon her face that would have been called a scowl if it had disfigured the homelier features of Bates the cook, and which Daisy was quite conscious of, for it had spread its shadow over her feelings.

She was thinking of Bert Lycester and Jonas Peacock and of the hold the former was obtaining upon her father. Daisy did not quite like it. Her father had always had a mind of his own in matters of business, and had got on very well by his own efforts, and to see him defer to the opinions of a young man like his shop manager, and to hear him congratulate himself on the acumen that had led him to espy the pure gold of genius and devotion in Mr. Lycester when that gentleman had applied for the job, gave Daisy a little quiver of uneasiness that she was trying to account for.

For the last few months her father had never tired of trumpeting Bert's praises, and trumpet solos soon become wearisome, and Daisy was getting sick of them. Moreover, these eulogies betrayed a lack of balance and judgment on her father's part that was increasingly disturbing. Jonas might not be as brilliant and quick-witted as Bert, but it was ridiculously untrue to call him (as her father had done only that week) "stodgy, and as stale as last week's newspaper," compared with the other. Daisy did not like that. It shewed bias : it even shewed blindness : it was not far removed from infatuation, and Daisy did not want an infatuated father. She had not been infatuated herself—oh, dear, no. With a mole in her own eye how could she have seen the beam in her father's? She thanked heaven she kept a cool, clear head. After all, Jonas had been a faithful friend, and he had qualities, admirable qualities, that Bert lacked, and that would have shone

more brightly if they had not been displayed against a background of Peacock. Daisy liked to be fair; and though Jonas laughed at her and at Bert and refused to become melancholy and to go about in metaphorical sackcloth and ashes, all of which was very annoying and unloverlike, she felt that she must be just to him.

The fact is, Mr. Knox praised with ever-increasing heartiness and appreciation the qualities in Mr. Lycester that Daisy least liked, and depreciated those in Mr. Peacock that Daisy knew to be sterling. It was all very well for Bert to be smart, and Daisy liked smartness, but there was a point at which it was not clearly distinguishable from trickery, and some of the actions which Mr. Knox applauded and laughed at over the supper table, and which she would never otherwise have heard of, came under the head of "doubtful" in Daisy's intuitive ethical code. Formerly Daisy had respected her father as well as loved him, and his acceptance of what she could not but realise to be a lower moral standard gave her real uneasiness.

She had tried to reason with Mr. Lycester on one or two occasions that had followed her father's unseasonable hilarity, but had only succeeded in delighting him at his success and stimulating him to further efforts to win his employer's goodwill. He had been particularly severe on Sam when he learned that Mr. Knox thought it did him no harm to be knocked about a bit; and he was always ready to assure Daisy that business matters of this kind must be left to men of the world like her father and himself, who kept sentiment to the drawing-room and the promenade deck, and never allowed it to speak to the man at the wheel. That was an opinion that Jonas

did not share, but then he and Mr. Lycester did not often hit it, and there had been meaning in Mr. Peacock's remark that he might be a Jonas but he thanked his lucky stars he wasn't a jackass.

So Daisy looked out of the window on New Year's Day and frowned and forgot to make any good resolutions because she was thinking of old decisions and wondering if they had been wise ones, and because she was cursing—in a ladylike and quite permissible way—the imbecilities of the English language and the fatuities of parents that permitted such words as Peacock and Jonas to be coined and brought into conjunction. Then she turned and went into the kitchen to inquire about the liver disturbers that were being prepared for the evening meal which the rival suitors had been invited by her father to share with them.

Mr. Lycester turned up with a chrysanthemum in his button-hole and a heap of flowery good wishes on his tongue. He was as buoyant as a butterfly and hovered about his hostess with the same delicate airs. He was not in evening dress for two excellent reasons, the first being that he did not possess a dress suit, and the second that his host never shut himself up in one if he could possibly help it. That was fortunate, because dress suits cost what Mr. Lycester called "good money," and he did not care to part with too much of that commodity. His frock coat, however, fitted him perfectly, and he looked much more elegant as a drawing-room ornament than either Mr. Knox or Jonas, who both wore "slack-backs," which was the former gentleman's name for short jackets.

Mr. Knox was in excellent spirits, and he sipped his coffee after dinner with as much peace and goodwill in

his heart as any angel could have exhibited or asked for. Jonas sat near him in one of those deep chairs which tempt men to disregard everything except their own ease, and which place them at a disadvantage when it is a question of picking up a lady's handkerchief or opening a door for her, or helping her to select her songs. Mr. Lycester, however, in the rôle of the lynx-eyed butterfly, made attentions of this kind on Jonas's part quite unnecessary.

Daisy did not like it, and there were times during the evening when she would have liked to excuse herself and go away into her bedroom for a good cry, but that was impossible, for she would not have allowed that horrid Jonas to see her with rings round her eyes for anything, to say nothing of Mr. Lycester, who would, of course, be heart-broken. Perhaps it was the fear that Jonas would not be heart-broken that made her inward tears so bitter, for although Daisy was a very sweet and sympathetic young woman (and she was, in spite of all evidence to the contrary), she was disappointed and hurt to find that one of the two moths that had been fluttering round her candle refused to enter a wing-singeing competition, and could make himself happy and comfortable in a saddlebag.

Mr. Lycester, of course, was in Eden and didn't care a button for such a lazy, indifferent throw-up-the-sponge sort of serpent as Jonas Peacock, and he treated him with the lofty toleration that a man who is nearing the goal of his hopes can afford to extend to a competitor who has dropped out of the race and is content to be an interested onlooker.

Jonas chuckled inwardly as he smoked his pipe and watched the game, though there were times when he felt inclined to get up and throw the silly ass (for a

lazy serpent Jonas's epithets were remarkably vigorous) through the window and take possession of Daisy before her father's eyes. One would have said that he was physically unequal to the first half of the task, but if faith can remove mountains, surely love, which is greater than faith, could remove a scented muck-heap like Lycester, and Jonas (again in spite of all evidence to the contrary) was over head and ears in love with Daisy and stubbornly determined to win her.

He was just as stubbornly determined to stand aside and let his rival hang himself at his own leisure, and he really got a great deal of amusement out of the play and would not spoil what he believed to be a farce by foreseeing a tragedy in the last act.

That was where he differed from Mr. Knox, who was an older and perhaps a wiser man; who at any rate made allowances for possibilities; who regarded young women as "kittle cattle" who might go mad at any moment, goaded to their own destruction by the silly whims and sudden huffs that are beyond a man's comprehension. And therefore behind his mask of unconcern and false pretence he was sometimes in a state of cold sweat lest Daisy should take him at his word and Mr. Lycester at his sham valuation and throw herself into his manager's arms. More than once he had been on the point of sending Mr. Lycester about his business; quite as often it had been on the tip of his tongue to speak his mind to Daisy (his own original mind; not the mind born of Mrs. Tickle and begotten of diplomacy), but he had always managed to restrain himself, and now that there were signs that the end was about to justify the means he had periods like the present of real enjoyment interrupted by occasional spasms of apprehension.

Of course Daisy sang. She had a pile of modern songs—those with two short verses that end before one knows what they are about—and Mr. Lycester made a careful selection from them with the air of a critic and censor of music. Daisy fingered them and turned to her father with the corner of her eye on Jonas.

“What would you like, dad?”

“Please yourself,” said her obliging parent. “Anything that suits you and Bert ’ll do for me.”

“I thought Lycester was arranging the programme,” muttered Jonas. “Go on, Daisy. Let’s see what sort of an impresario he makes.”

Mr. Lycester scowled. For one thing he did not know what an impresario was, and he wasn’t at all sure that the word did not cover an insult, and for another he didn’t call his hostess Daisy—not yet—and it was just like Peacock’s impudence to emphasise his greater familiarity. Daisy frowned too, and sang a melancholy song from memory that was designed to stab Jonas and make him bleed. She sang it plaintively and with studied clearness of articulation, and there was a thrill in her voice that was as impressive as it was meant to be.

“By Jove!” said Jonas, when she had finished, “that was ripping, Daisy. I don’t know when I’ve heard you sing it as well. All good solo work is a duet—the soul and the voice singing together—don’t you think so, Lycester? Sing ‘Auld Robin Grey,’ Daisy, will you?”

At that moment the thing that would have pleased Miss Knox more than anything else in the wide world would have been to go to Mr. Peacock and box him soundly on the ears. The restrictions of our absurd

conventionalism forbade that, of course, so she choked back her feelings and discovered a huskiness that made further singing impossible. Mr. Lycester prescribed grapes and straightway dispensed his prescription, and Daisy played with the fruit and was very gracious to her companion and very haughty towards the apparently unconscious offender across the hearth.

Mr. Lycester did not know what was wrong, but as it was clear that he was not the culprit he was not perturbed. He was turning to Daisy when Jonas addressed him.

"Don't you sing, Lycester?"

Mr. Lycester, whose voice would have raised the bristles of the most long-suffering hedgehog, explained that he didn't do much at it, and Mr. Knox suggested that the notes his manager was interested in were of a baser currency.

"L s. d.'s his staff notation, same as mine," he said. "That's the staff of life, isn't it, Bert? There'd soon be no tune if somebody wasn't working to pay the piper. Song singing and picture painting and piano strumming are all right for young ladies who've been born with a silver spoon in their mouths, but——"

The look Daisy gave him brought the sentence to a full stop before it was completed. Unfortunately Mr. Lycester did not see it, and he thought Mr. Knox was suffering from a shortage of ideas and so came to his help.

"That's so," he said, as he cut the end off one of his host's cigars. "Talk about silvery notes, there's nothing beats the clink of coin, and jolly good sport I call it to put your brains into that sort of music. You and I are composers of that kind, Mr. Knox."

"I'll bet they had some fun when they put their brains into the golden calf," said Jonas. "Didn't they dance round it and have a regular jollification, or am I mixing it up with something else? You'll know, Lycester. You're a regular churchgoer."

That was a true statement. Bert attended the same church as Daisy with praiseworthy regularity.

Mr. Lycester was unwilling to commit himself, and wholly indifferent to the doings of the ancient Israelites, and he said as much.

"I thought you were interested in art," Jonas said apologetically, "and when it's a question of art and gold combined I should have said it was just your ticket. But of course it was pre-Raphaelite—I ought to have remembered that. What I'm trying to get at is that it's curious how people have always made gold into a god and danced around it."

Mr. Lycester's lip curled.

"It's curious how sour grapes are when you can't reach them," he said.

Jonas laughed.

"Philosophical old fox, that was," he replied. "But I'm wondering what sort of taste the gold had when old Moses turned the calf into powder and made them take it in water. I guess they'd more gold than they wanted for the first time in their lives. One of the first examples of homeopathy I should say—like curing like."

"Well, what's it all about?" Mr. Knox asked. "Don't tell me that you've a soul above brass, because that's humbug. I side with Lycester. Why, what would life be without business, and what's the good of business if it isn't to make money?"

"There are things of far more value than money,"

said Daisy in the lofty tone that young people of sentiment and high-flown theory adopt so easily; and she closed her lips as if to imply that judgment had been pronounced and Jonas was not to expect that she was going to appear as his advocate.

Mr. Knox looked round the room suggestively. Every article in it had been selected by Daisy and had cost "good money"—quite a lot of good money. There was a small fortune in the electric fittings—the bronze figures that held the torches, and the silver lamps with the silk shades had made quite a decent-sized hole in Mr. Knox's bank account. That was to say nothing of the grand piano and the pictures and the cabinet and the carpet. Mr. Knox smiled as he concluded the tour of the room, and the smile was as eloquent as a speech and as provocative as an argument.

Mr. Lycester laughed and Daisy raised her eyebrows and looked scornful.

Jonas saved the situation.

"Talking about making money," he said. "I know a youth who's likely to beat you both at the job if he gives his heart to it. I'm trying to induce him to give his heart to his work instead, and I've a notion that I shall succeed."

Mr. Knox, who guessed what was coming, assumed a look of innocent interest, and Mr. Lycester glanced at Daisy and scarcely concealed a sneer. His astonishment was unbounded when Jonas went on after the merest pause—

"You all know him—Sam Munday."

Mr. Knox dropped his cigar ash on his knee and blessed his life with considerable emphasis. It was very well acted indeed, and it gave the others time to recover their breath.

"If you'll allow me to say so," Mr. Lycester remarked icily, "Sam Munday's a conceited young fool who needs to be taken down a peg."

"But how do you mean?" Mr. Knox inquired, turning a surprised face on Jonas. "He's sharp, is the lad, I'll grant that, and maybe a bit forward, as Bert says—he's likely to know better than me—but what do you know about him?"

Jonas knew a good deal about him, and he told what he was disposed to tell, and his auditors learned that Mr. Peacock had made Sam's acquaintance accidentally and had been favourably impressed by the lad and was trying to give him a lift in life; that he had set himself the task of educating his protégé, and had soon discovered that he was indifferent to the attractions of ordinary knowledge of the three R's order, but very quick to see the advantage of practical instruction in mechanics and chemistry, in both of which Jonas dabbled. Jonas did not become enthusiastic in Sam's praises, but he was certainly warm, and Mr. Lycester felt it his duty to throw cold water on the encomiums in the interests of truth.

"I've no wish to do the lad any harm," he said glibly, "but if I'd my way he'd take his talents elsewhere. I tell you straight I've my doubts about that youth."

Daisy raised her head and looked hard at her neighbour, but he was glancing meaningly at his employer.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Knox asked. "If there's aught wrong it'll be an easy job to shift him."

"I'd rather not say just at present," Mr. Lycester replied darkly. "I have my eye on him, and you may be sure I shall keep it there."

Mr. Knox was quite sure on that point—as sure as he was that his own eye was going to be kept on Mr. Lycester—and he merely nodded.

Jonas smiled again.

“I don’t know much about him,” he said; “but if the lad doesn’t make good I’ll eat my hat.”

Daisy was annoyed with Mr. Lycester, and in a less degree with her father. She believed in Sam and she believed in Jonas’s judgment. She was grateful to Jonas, and she now turned to him. Her huskiness must have gone, for she said in her sweetest manner—

“Well, let us drop Sam Munday and the golden calf and all the rest of it. Do you think, Joe, you and I could manage ‘When the Wind Blows in from the Sea’?”

Jonas thought they could.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT STRIKE.

THERE was trouble in the Brickfields—trouble of the heavy overshadowing kind that affects a whole community. It was visible to the eye, for the district had three times its normal day population, and it was perceptible to other senses.

A great factory strike had taken place, and now in mid-March and the sixth week of the event, the masters had proclaimed a lock-out, and so carried the war into the enemy's camp. This embittered the feeling of resentment that was already strong, and the Brickfields was only one of many localities where threats were being muttered beneath men's breaths and repeated in approving whispers by their wives and daughters.

Nowhere was the gloom deeper, nowhere were threats and curses more violent than in the Brickfields area. The residents there were always poor and many of them were destitute: many of them were the class below that which pawns its Sunday clothes every Monday morning—they were those whom a week's illness or unemployment throws at once upon the parish; and the houses were few indeed where the wolf did not now kennel on the doorstep.

Nor was the strike the only evil; the very heavens

seemed to have sided with the masters in their fight against the poor, and a hard frost had held the country in its grip of steel for several weeks. Most of the men who worked at all were labourers, unskilled and dependent on casual jobs, and ready enough to conserve their energies for those rare and rough occasions when their wives and children were unable to earn money at the mill. Now that the devil was driving and it was a case of "needs must," the heavens became brass and mocked their willingness.

Famine walked unabashed in Rose Street and the streets below, and was an unwelcome visitor at certain houses in Brick Row and the region beyond. To add to the distress, a kind of low fever broke out which spread like a plague and baffled the authorities. It was pitiful to hear the children cry and to see the mothers' despair, but these were sounds and sights known to few beyond the sufferers themselves and the doctor and the parsons. It was pitiful to see homes that had made some small advance towards comfort stripped of everything that the pawnbroker would consent to handle and turned into mere shelters, colder and less cheerful than many a barn. Babies died of starvation and no coroner held inquest upon them; the worst cases of sickness were removed to the undreamed-of luxuries of the workhouse hospital, where they were treated with a loving care that made the prospect of recovery and a return to the Brickfields a dream of hell; hundreds never called in the doctor, but shifted for themselves as best they could—shivered and starved before their empty grates and became reckless and menacing as the man within their breasts receded and the beast came to his own. Then they broke bounds and preyed upon their fellows until they

were trapped and made captive by the uniformed hunters appointed by law to safeguard the community.

And all this because a dispute—at first a mere trifle—had arisen between masters and men on a question of wages, and the masters had refused to discuss the matter with the men's official representatives. Wiser counsels prevail now, and it may be hoped that the world which makes wonderful discoveries every day will find before long a way to link together the common interests of employers and employed so that factories shall no longer lie idle by the score as they did at this time, and the inhabitants of this country and of the Antipodes and of many a place between shall not feel the wave of disturbance caused by a trivial local dispute.

The wolf was not yet at the door of No. 7, Brick Row, but Maud Annie's nerves were jumpy in these days and she was always seeing its approaching shadow. Mrs. Tickle's face was thinner, and there was a look of weariness in her eyes, but her cheerfulness was too deep-rooted to wither in the winter of adversity.

"Now, Maud Annie"—Mrs. Tickle's tone was firm and her attitude decided—she was mistress of herself and of her household in fair weather and in foul—"it's time you stopped this nonsense and framed to be a woman. Trouble's got to be faced, but if you can't put a better sperrit into 't nor what you are doing I'd sooner you 'ired yourself out for a mute at funerals. You'd 'ave no lack o' jobs once they saw your face; but I won't 'ave it where it's earning naught, so now you know."

There was a line of humour about the mouth that softened the harshness of the speech a little, but Maud

Annie was inclined to be sulky. She stood with one hand on the table and looked down at it, and her mother stood on the other side observing her. Cissie was at school and Thomas was not indoors.

"It's all very well——" began Maud Annie, but her mother interrupted her.

"No, it isn't. It's all very ill, and don't you get it into your 'ead 'at I shut my eyes to 'it. I've known dark days afore, but none as dark as these. All t' same, I've no patience wi' them 'at won't light their bits o' candle but sits moping and crying like childer 'at's no more sense."

She tossed one end of a bed sheet across to Maud Annie, who helped her to fold it.

"I know wer savings is getting low, but t' resyvoy's none empty yet, and groaning and pulling long faces 'll none fill it. You're young, Maud Annie, and I make 'lowance for it, but you're old enough to count, and you want to reckon up what we 'ave to be thankful for. Isn't it capping 'at Cissie 'asn't 'ad to go short and thrives in t' middle of it all? There's someb'dy watching over us, and I'd be ashamed o' myself to go on as you do. You're getting till you can't talk civil, but has to spurt and sputter like fat in a frying-pan whenever you open your mouth."

Tears came into Maud Annie's eyes and her mother softened.

"Trouble comes to everybody in their turn," she went on, "but I've never been one for lying down and letting it walk over me. If it's t' Old Lad 'at sends it—and nob'dy else 'ud ha' sent this 'ere—it isn't 'im 'at sends Simpsons' baskets, and I'd shame to let either one or t' other see me 'eart-sloughened : I'd 'ave more sperrit."

"Mother," said Maud Annie, "I can't bear it. It's bad enough for us but look at Louisa and lots more. It's like living in hell down here."

"It 'ud be 'ell all t' same if you wasn't in it," said her mother. "You don't cure a smell wi' plugging your nose up, and what you want to do is to try and bring 'em a bit of 'eaven. I wouldn't be out o' t' Brickfields now if you was to pay me to go and give me a 'ouse rent free. It's worth living to know 'at you can 'elp a bit, and I'd sooner burn my candle nor save it, and I only wish you'd put a match to yours. I'm capped you can't get out o' your doldrums, but you never will while you take a pleasure in 'em. You can say as you like, but you'd be fair mis'erable if you'd naught to grumble about. As for bearing it, you've got to bear it, whether you can or you can't, and if you was to think o' lightening someb'dy else's load i'stead o' groaning about 'em 'aving so much to carry it 'ud seem you better."

By-and-by Mrs. Tickle left Maud Annie to finish folding the clothes and stepped across the road to where the blinds were drawn. Little Mr. Brown, the Scripture reader and vicar's help from the Church of All Saints, that was hidden away like a big black pip in the very core of the slums, was standing on the hearth speaking what he took to be truth in a sepulchral tone of voice that came like a cold draught from a cellar. Everybody, including his vicar, knew him to be a well-meaning man, and short of charging him with actual sin you cannot say anything much worse than that of a Scripture-reader.

He had meant well on this occasion, but a glance at her neighbours' faces was sufficient to convince Mrs. Tickle that he had succeeded ill. Louisa sat at the

table. Her sleeves were doubled up to the elbows and she supported her head in both hands and looked towards the shaded window with eyes that were defiant and glittering, though not with the glitter of tears. Mrs. Tickle heard the impatient tap-tap of her foot beneath the table.

Her mother was in the arm-chair and she groaned a spasmodic assent to everything the little man said and begged him to leave off and go with every movement of her brow, but that was a language Mr. Brown had not learned, and the groans pleased him because they clearly indicated that his seed was falling upon good ground. Mrs. Tickle's presence was disturbing, but he accepted it as a challenge and his tone became sterner and more dogmatic. Mrs. Tickle was not one of his favourites, for she never groaned her responses and she even dared to question his teaching. He saw her face cloud now, but before she could speak there was an outburst from the girl at the table.

Louisa sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing with fury. She banged the deal board with clenched fist as she said :

"Damn you, and all like you! If my baby's in 'ell I want naught better nor to go to 'im."

"Nay, Louisa!" her mother exclaimed. "Ee, why she must ha' lost 'er wits, poor lass," but Louisa interrupted her.

"Go! go!" she shouted, and she stamped her foot in her passion. "Go! go! go!"

Mr. Brown's face grew white. He was easily scared and he reached for his round black felt and moved a step or two towards the door. Mrs. Tickle put her hand on Louisa's shoulder. "Whisht! lass," she said. Then she turned to the Scripture-reader

who was regaining courage and now seemed half inclined to brave it out.

"You'd better go, Mr. Brown, as Louisa says. Eh, dear, women's always 'aving to mend and patch after t' men. You meant naught wrong, I'll warrant, but a man's no use for a job o' this sort unless 'e's got a good lump of 'is mother in 'im. Now off you go and leave us women to darn t' rent you've made."

Mr. Brown went without a word. Whether or no he shook the dust of the house off his feet cannot be known, but he paid no further visit of condolence there and left the stricken household to the ministrations of unpaid deaconesses like Mrs. Tickle. There was work enough in the neighbourhood for both.

The hard ugly look did not leave the girl's face when the unwelcome visitor left.

"If that's t' way God deals wi' folk just 'cos I 'adn't 'ad water sprinkled on 'is face ——"

Her breath came in gasps and her cheeks were flushed.

"'Ush, 'ush, lass," said Mrs. Tickle. "I'll talk to you after a bit. Let me go up and 'ave a look at 'im."

They do that kind of thing in the Brickfields. They encourage morbid feelings and many of the customs that are honoured at such times are not only grim but unwholesome and cannot disappear too soon, but there is something to be said in defence. The people are not afraid to look upon death, and it seems to them neighbourly to call and pay their last respects to the departed in this way, especially when they see that it comforts and compliments those who are left behind.

There was not much to see—only a little wizened face with not a trace of beauty, scarcely a pleasing line about it—and Louisa gazed upon it dry-eyed. Mrs. Tickle looked at it reverently and smoothed the thin hair with a gentle touch.

“Now then,” she said at length. “What was it all about? Mr. Brown didn’t say—that there, did ‘e?”

Louisa had sat down at the foot of the bed and she flashed into anger again at Mrs. Tickle’s question.

“It came to t’ same thing,” she replied. “He said what a sad job it was ‘at we ‘adn’t ‘ad ‘im christened, an’ ‘at parents ought to remember what it meant for their childer. If ‘e ‘adn’t ha’ gone I’d ha’ broke ‘is jaw for ‘im.”

“‘ush, lass!” said Mrs. Tickle soothingly. “You ‘appen didn’t just catch ‘is meaning, and anyway you’ve got to remember ‘at ‘e’s naught but a man, and what does men like ‘im know about mothers and their troubles? I’d as soon trust a cat to comfort a canary. But it does seem strange, right enough, ‘at them ‘at’s paid for t’ job oft seems as full o’ light as a box o’ matches ‘at ‘asn’t been dipped.”

Louisa looked hard at Mrs. Tickle and there was as much suspicion as hope in the scrutiny. She knew nothing of religion and ordinarily did not care to penetrate its mysteries, but Mr. Brown was paid to know about it and to dole it out as required like a spiritual relieving-officer. It was all very well for Mrs. Tickle to brush authority aside in this way, but was it not merely her motherly heart that was speaking? Louisa was in no mood for swallowing sugared crumbs of comfort that were designed to neutralise an unwelcome truth. She did not put all this into words, but

Mrs. Tickle caught her meaning and sat down on the one chair the room contained.

"I can see where you are, Louisa; you think I'm 'aybe 'umbugging you 'cos I'm a mother myself, and you know I don't reckon to be religious in t' same way as Mr. Brown, and 'at I 'aven't a lot o' learning.

"But you know, lass, we all get wer knowledge out o' t' same Book and I could find you where it says 'at a wayfaring man even if 'e's a fool needn't miss t' straight road, so I'm sure a woman needn't. Mr. Brown's always making it out 'at you'll never get in at t' far end if you 'aven't one of 'is tickets, but I take no notice o' such like chatter.

"You want to know where t' little lad is and I'll tell you—'e's wi' 'Im 'at sent 'im. I could find you t' place where it tells as plain, you'd think no man 'owever gawmless 'e was 'ud miss it, 'at 'E carries the lambs in 'Is arms. I'll find you up some o' t' things it says about little 'uns and read you 'em when you've got 'im put away. You make no mistake: 'e's better off nor 'e ever was."

Mrs. Tickle's mouth tightened and one or two tears found their way into Louisa's eyes which harboured them unwillingly. She was too proud to brush them away.

"T' doctor says 'e's been starved," she said in a low voice, "but I didn't know I was starving 'im. I'd ha' begged—aye, or I'd ha' stolen afore 'e should ha' pined; but I couldn't get 'im to taste 'ardly."

"Aye, God 'elp us," Mrs. Tickle replied. "Nob'dy blames you and you needn't blame yourself. There's lots more gone t' same way since t' strike."

"God damn them 'at's done it," said Louisa with

fierce intensity. The imprecation was nothing to Mrs. Tickle who replied calmly :

“There’s nob’dy for ’Im to damn, lass. They all think they’re in t’ right, both t’ masters and t’ ’ands; and they’re all like a lot o’ spoiled childer if you ask me. I don’t know what’s to be t’ end on ’t, but I suppose when they’re tired o’ fratching both sides ’ll give in a bit and they’ll start afresh. ’Owever I must be going. I promised I’d look after t’ shop for an hour or so for Mrs. Grange. ’Er rheumatics is that bad she can ’ardly stir out o’ t’ chair and some o’ t’ young tykes knows it, and they’ve been running in and stealing t’ spice out o’ t’ bottles afore she could get this side o’ t’ screen. They’ll be capped when they see Sarah Tickle put ’er ’ead round, you bet, and if I catch ’em they’ll sit sore for a day or two.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE WOLF COMES TO NO. 7 AT LAST.

THE general opinion in Brick Row was that disaster had reached high-water mark when the news flew up and down the street that Mrs. Tickle was ill and bed-fast. Those who cursed providence as the author of their misfortunes were puzzled now because they felt that somehow the theory did not fit this latest development. Most of the sufferers might more fittingly have cursed Nemesis, but the god was unknown to them and so escaped. There were hardened wretches by the score, however, in the Brickfields who knew that they were wretches, and who had some sort of hazy notion of a retributive justice that might be expected to visit them at times in the natural order of things, but when a woman like Mrs. Tickle was laid by the heels the circumstance was calculated to make providence appear spiteful and indiscriminating.

Sooty Bill, whose trade was prosperous because spring-cleaning was in season, and who was kept so busy that he was confirmed in an oft-expressed opinion that it was a waste of time and soap to wash in the evening when he wasn't going to bed, discoursed on the subject of their neighbour's misfortune with Punch Farrer, whose winter season had come to an end. Punch's disposition was to live royally when funds

were plentiful and to trust to luck the rest of the time, and luck had never proved very trustworthy. This was one of the occasions when the jade had deserted him as Sooty Bill very well knew.

"Why the so-and-so shouldn't you starve?" the sweep asked as he leaned against the jamb of the inner door and surveyed the Farrers' bare-looking kitchen. "Chaps like you an' me what never does nowt for nowt, an' what empties wer earnin's down wer throttles as fast as we get 'em deserves to starve. You must live o' wind, you silly 'ound, like your sanguinary dollies."

The strongly-scented smoke from his pipe filled the room and added to Mr. Farrer's sense of grievance.

"You aren't an angel yourself," he remarked sourly. "Leastways if you are you're one o' t' black variety what carries pitchforks. It's t' pot calling t' pan."

"That's what I said," returned Sooty placidly, "if you'd nobbut listen. I shall be pawning t' clock in another month or two an' tightenin' my belt at meal times when you're drawin' pocketsful o' brass out of a lot o' condemned idiots at t' seaside. But it's 'ard cheese for Number Seven what's wore 'erself away wi' lookin' after other fowk."

Sooty was sober and virtuous, in which respect he differed from some of his neighbours, who were always most virtuous when they were least sober.

Punch's reply to this remark was to the effect that misfortune would perhaps "learn 'er to look after number one."

Sooty puffed at his pipe and then removed it to spit over his shoulder into what might be termed the vestibule, and said nothing for a minute or two, and

Punch sat with his legs stretched over the fender and his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

"She takes a bit o' reckonin' up, does Number Seven," said the sweep at length.

"Was there ever a woman you could reckon up?" growled Punch. "They're all as contrairy as a pig in a pet, but Sarah isn't one o' t' worst."

This was a notable concession. Punch's own wife had the gift of a tongue, and Sooty grinned.

"Thee and me could find worse, Punch, if we was to grope about i' bed, eh?"

The humour of the remark brought a faint smile to Punch's face, but it was short-lived.

"My missus has gone across to see if she can do aught," he explained, and the sweep laughed outright.

"Then there'll 'appen be a bit o' supper for one o' t' fam'ly," he said. "She's as fly as 'ere an' there one, is Bet, an' knows 'ow to swop a pennorth o' sympathy for two pennorth o' supper."

Mrs. Tickle had fallen a victim to over-exertion and the inclemency of the weather. The frost had yielded towards the end of March, but it had done so very ungraciously, and like a stubborn enemy had tried to regain at night what it had lost during the day. Every morning the sun came out and boasted its growing power, but cold winds from the north-east drove the clouds in front of them each afternoon and icy showers of rain swept the streets, and the wind and the rain together searched out the weak places in man and beast and left there the germs of influenza and rheumatism and such other ailments as the conditions favoured. In Mrs. Tickle's case it was sciatica, or "t' skyatics," to give it its local appellation. As the premonitory symptoms had been unheeded, Mrs.

Tickle endured agonies for a fortnight and became more low-spirited than Maud Annie had ever known her. She had still a good deal of pain in the fourth week of her illness, but she had insisted on coming downstairs and a bed had therefore been made up for her in the living-room. Here she regained her good spirits at a bound and dispensed homely philosophy to her own family and the neighbours who called to make inquiries.

"Now," said Maud Annie, when her patient had got over the groans that had accompanied the transference to the new quarters, and was lying propped up in bed—"you're monarch of all you survey same as Robinson Crusoe."

"Aye," said her mother, "I've been stalled o' surveying t' wall-paper in t' bedroom. I could a'most tell you 'ow many vi'lets there is from t' ceiling to t' floor; and as for that yellow-edged patch o' damp in t' corner I could ha' thrown t' bolster at it. It'll be grand to see what's stirring."

The doctor called in the evening. His face was grey and weary-looking, and when he had felt the patient's pulse he sat down in the arm-chair and held his hands over the blaze in the grate.

"I don't know what the dickens made you go and lie up at a time like this," he grumbled. "I thought you'd more sense, Mrs. Tickle, and would have known better. It isn't as if you hadn't had it before and couldn't tell sciatica from growing-pains. It wasn't fair to me. If I'd two pairs of legs I should be run off 'em, and you were as good as a prophylactic as long as you kept on your feet."

"What sort of a thing's a prophy——?" inquired Maud Annie.

"It's a disinfectant over a sewer, and a poultice over a pain, and anything else that experience and gumption put into a sensible woman's head," he replied. "Or it may be a loaf of bread or a cheerful word or two to buck a body up, or a hundred other things that your mother knows about and that you've hardly begun to learn yet; and it's the very devil to have her on her back at a time like this."

"It is the very devil," Maud Annie agreed feelingly.

Mrs. Tickle chuckled.

"Mr. Brown made it out 'at it was t' devil's Master when 'e called, but if 'e'd felt what I've felt 'e'd ha' thought it was t' Old Lad using 'is pinchers on 'is leg. Anyway, I'd sooner put t' blame on t' devil nor on 'is Master, same as lots does."

"If you'd put the blame on yourself you'd be nearer the mark," growled the doctor. "We could have stopped it if you'd said a word early enough."

"Well, see *you* don't go too far," replied Mrs. Tickle. "You seem fit to drop. What's brought you out at this time o' night? You didn't come o' purpose for me, I 'ope?"

The doctor looked into the fire without replying for a moment. Then he said abruptly—

"Lady Peggy's dead. I've just left there."

"Eh, poor soul," said Mrs. Tickle. "I 'eard tell she was badly, but I'd no idea she was at t' far end. It's to be 'oped she's gone where she can 'ave a fresh start and a better chance. I could ha' liked to ha' seen 'er afore she'd gone."

"She called out for you many a time," said the doctor gruffly. "I'd have given a five-pound note out of my own pocket to have had you there. You'd

have managed where I couldn't. It took me all my time to quieten her."

"Nay for sure!" replied Mrs. Tickle. "Well, it's no use fretting about t' lass. She never had much of a chance after 'er mother died."

"No," said the doctor. "Providence gave her a pretty face and an express ticket to hell. The two things go together in this district. You may thank your lucky stars, Maud Annie, that you're only plain-looking."

Maud Annie's face became red. The doctor's words were slanderous, and she knew he was teasing her, and made no remark. Her mother, however, replied promptly—

"There's lots o' things Maud Annie may be thankful for, and one of 'em is 'at she's been brought up in a good 'ome where she's been learnt to take care of 'erself. There's lots worse looking nor our Maud Annie, if I didn't ought to say so, but if she was as 'andsome as Lady Peggy was at 'er best she'd none go wrong, I'll warrant. But Lady Peggy was as good-'earted a lass as ever lived in t' Brickfields, and it'll cap me if she isn't in a better place now."

"She couldn't be in a much worse," said the doctor still grimly. "All the same, she didn't die with a text on her lips. I know I wished many a score times that you were there to talk to her a bit. I'll doctor their bodies, but somebody else must doctor their souls."

"I don't care what she died with," Mrs. Tickle replied firmly. "She's gone where folks is done right by. I could shew you t' place where it says 'at t' Judge of all the earth 'll do right, and it's naught but right to my thinking 'at t' poor lass should 'ave a

fresh start 'cos she never 'ad a cat's chance 'ere after 'er mother died—you know that."

The doctor rose and stretched himself.

"I fancy there's something wrong with your theology, Mrs. Tickle," he said, "but I hope you're right all the same."

"Don't you worry," Mrs. Tickle replied. "It's right what I say, sure enough."

"She'd a bit of a struggle at the end," said the doctor with increased gruffness, "but I saw there was something she wanted to say and I made it out after a while. It was that damned canary. She wants you to have it, and I promised I'd bring it across in the morning. I believe it helped her to go when she'd got that off her mind."

"Eh, poor lass," said Mrs. Tickle. "We'll 'ave it and welcome."

"Mother," said Maud Annie later on in the evening, "I've kept it from you 'cos you'd enough to bear, but I shall be forced to tell you now. We're almost spent up and all t' bit I've saved has gone too. It's all very well saying 'at we haven't to worry, but what's going to happen to us all? If it hadn't been for Sam——"

She did not complete the sentence. Much that Sam had done was a secret she was pledged not to reveal. She knew all about the account in Mr. Knox's ledger, but Sam had been forced to admit that the well was running dry, and the boy's sacrifices and ingenuity were unequal to the demands that his sympathies made upon them. As for Maud Annie's own resources—well, a constantly diminishing strike pay did not go far with four mouths to fill and sickness in the house, and now that the Union's funds were nearly exhausted the prospect was dark in the extreme. Black care

had been the girl's companion for many a day, but she had tried hard to keep the unwelcome visitor hidden from her mother's eyes whilst she had been upstairs. Now she knew she could do so no longer.

"'Ave you 'ad to pinch, Maud Annie?" Mrs. Tickle looked closely at the girl's face and tried to read the answer there. Maud Annie did not cry. She was sitting at the table resting her aching head on her hand and gazing on the rug. She looked older and more womanly, and yet her mother had noticed that she was less fretful and snappish. The gaslight fell upon her face, making it white and somewhat ghastly, but it was not merely the effect of light and shade that caused the cheek bones to stand out and the cheeks themselves to shew unwonted hollows. The motherly heart felt a pang that was more poignant than the pain along the nerve.

Maud Annie did not reply, and Mrs. Tickle forebore to press the question. Her mind was busy, however, and she began to lose the sense of personal discomfort as she reviewed the situation.

"I don't know 'ow it is," she said, "but they always seem to send you t' bitterest med'cine when you're on t' mend—to brace you up, like, I suppose. And 'owever bad things are, and I'm not denying 'at they're bad enough, they're a day nearer t' end nor they were yesterday at this time, and bad news seems to ha' taken t' ache out o' my leg. Now just let's see where we are, Maud Annie. It'll none 'urt me."

The girl looked at her mother admiringly. It was not her nature to go up to the bed and put an arm about her neck or to bestow any tokens of endearment of the kind that many mothers and daughters exchange. Such external indications of affection were

not unknown in the Brickfields, but they were indulged in cautiously and with something like shame, and would have been regarded by the vast majority as exotic growths that were unsuited to the soil of that grimy area, though appropriate enough to the greenhouse conditions of Suburbia. Cissie was one of the exceptions, but though Mrs. Tickle tolerated the caresses it was chiefly because the child was delicate and a wee bit "other-worldly," and in her heart of hearts the mother regarded them as a sign of weakness and was made vaguely uneasy. Maud Annie had never been demonstrative, nor had Thomas, but Mrs. Tickle did not doubt her hold on their affections.

"I'm glad you take it that way," said Maud Annie. "I never knew nobody like you. You won't look on t' dark side of things."

"If we'd been meant to see wer way in t' dark we should ha' been given cats' eyes," said Mrs. Tickle. "It isn't oft it's so dark but what you can see where to put your next foot, and if you can't it's time to stand still and wait a bit, chance you run your 'ead again' a wall. Is there enough in t' purse for another day or two?"

"It isn't as bad as that," Maud Annie replied; "but there isn't much more than what'll last another week or so, choose how we pinch, and what'll happen to us then God only knows."

Mrs. Tickle was relieved. She had been afraid things were worse.

"Well, I don't know 'at it matters about anybody else knowing," she said. "Now look 'ere, lass. I've always been one 'at was willing to sup my share o' trouble, but not a fortnight before t' time. Don't you fret. Your Uncle Arthur 'll none see us fast if t'

worst comes to t' worst, and I shall be getting about myself in a bit and can do a day's charing now and then. I've 'eard tell 'at them 'at struggles t' most drowns t' soonest, so keep your pecker up, and when you can't swim, float."

"I'm very near at t' far end," said the girl. "There comes a time when you've got to that pass you don't care if you sink."

"Aye," said her mother with something of her old dryness, "but it isn't at nineteen; and them 'at's always worrying about it sinks many a 'underd times i' their thoughts afore their 'eads goes under, and ninety-nine times out o' t' 'underd they're saved at t' finish. I see no sense i' choking afore t' water gets up to your chin. Now push t' bolt in and come to bed. We can live a day at a time same as t' sparrows."

CHAPTER XVIII

SERGEANT SMITH IN THE ROLE OF LOVER.

SERGEANT SMITH in the rôle of lover was not what a connoisseur, however charitably disposed, would have called a "star turn." Indeed, he was distinctly uncomfortable in the part and almost desperately anxious to see the curtain drop upon that act of the play. In his opinion the preliminaries to matrimony ought to be as short as legal formalities conducted on strictly economical principles allowed, and he was visibly disappointed when Miss Mellor insisted on a period of probation appropriate to the case of a first offender who had tried to steal her heart so late in life.

Perhaps Ellen did the worthy officer an injustice, for as a matter of fact theft of this kind had been far removed from Mr. Smith's thoughts, but he could not, except at the risk of being discharged on the spot, plead "not guilty" to the indictment. Women, as the sergeant knew, were constitutionally incapable of taking common-sense views of these arrangements and were likely to be huffed if sentiment were excluded from the proceedings; yet sentiment and the sergeant had never been even on speaking terms, and it was annoying and inconvenient to have to cultivate the acquaintance now.

Nearly six months had gone by since the sergeant had unburdened himself of his perplexities in Mrs. Tickle's living room, and the arrangement with Ellen Mellor, which was to make him the happiest of police-officers, was less than five weeks old. Of the remaining period a considerable portion had been occupied in "letting I dare not wait upon I would." Indeed, he looked so long before he leaped that there was not much spring in him when at length he approached Miss Jane Butler and endeavoured to persuade her to leave the "Sun" in order to share the afternoon splendours of his affections. Miss Butler had been as immovable as the great luminary appears to be.

"Not me, sergeant," she had said, with an emphasis that would have justified Mrs. Tickle in claiming the prophetic gift, when Mr. Smith had explained his mission in words that were as plain as anything on a charge-sheet. "I know when I'm well off. I wouldn't have a husband on my conscience at my time of life. There's trouble enough in this world without making it for ourselves. I'm very much obliged to you, and no worse friends, I hope."

It would be untrue to say that Mr. Smith was hurt by the rebuff or that it caused him to return to the valley of indecision. All it did was to send him to the second name on the list (Nell Robinson having been crossed off), and the white collar that had been worn for the first courting expedition was still quite clean when he set out upon the second: the handkerchief with which he had mopped his brow on the steps of the "Sun" was only slightly soiled when he repeated the operation before the fateful door in Paradise Place.

His reception there had been more encouraging, and when he left half-an-hour later it was with an invitation to call again in a day or two for an answer. In the meantime Ellen had undertaken to think it over and pray about it; but the sergeant, whose love was not of the kind that blinds and whose shrewdness, now that he was getting used to the job, did not fail him, saw that she was gratified by the suggestion and did not worry himself about the consultation with divinity. He had been all the more disappointed therefore to find himself "on trial," so to speak, like a domestic servant for one month, but he had raised no real objection, and when the probationary period was over and Ellen, after a few hesitating words, had held up her face to be kissed, the sergeant was not sure whether he was pleased or sorry. He had braced himself, however, and put his moustache to Ellen's sallow cheek, devoutly hoping all the time that the action would never be brought up against him; and when Gertie had come in he had been introduced and established as a prospective husband.

That was five weeks ago, and Ellen's necessary preparations, together with her sense of caution, required seven more to elapse before the knot should be tied so fast that only death or the law should be able to unloose it.

Courting nights were seasons of discomfort to the sergeant; one might almost say that the humble kitchen in Paradise Place became on these occasions a torture chamber. Gertie and Sam always disappeared in spite of the most urgent entreaties on Mr. Smith's part that they would remain. There were possibilities in a party of four. A pack of cards gives wings to hours that move when such pastimes are wanting with

tired feet. Ellen did not look favourably on cards, but neither did the sergeant look favourably on tête-à-tête conversations with two chairs drawn ridiculously close together, and a woman "cooing like a daft cuckoo" in a man's ear. Cooing is not very characteristic of cuckoos, but the simile was the sergeant's, and the sergeant was no more successful as a naturalist than as a sentimentalist. The greater part of the evening was spent, as far as he was concerned, in a cold sweat induced by desperate efforts to think of something to say, whilst the lady gave herself up to the enjoyment of a situation of which she knew herself to be mistress.

When the hands of the clock pointed to half-past nine the sergeant's pores invariably began to close, for at that hour Ellen rose to spread the cloth for supper, and Gertie and Sam usually made their appearance a few minutes later. Sunday evenings, which were "extras" on the courting bill-of-fare, and could be indulged in only when the sergeant was off duty, were the most enjoyable seasons on the whole, because the public was not excluded and demonstrations of affection were banned.

On one such evening in May the sergeant sat in the chimney corner with an open album on his knee. The albums, three in number and heavily bound in leather, usually occupied the place of honour on the chest of drawers. Mr. Smith had taken one of them down and was turning over the leaves without much interest whilst the ladies were getting supper ready. Sam sat with his legs stretched out and his slippered feet on the fender and consumed a cigarette. He was very favourably disposed towards the sergeant, whom he felt in a position to patronise, seeing that it was he

who, if results were to be traced to their first causes, was the author of that gentleman's forthcoming domestic bliss. Occasionally he turned his head and glanced at the photographs which the sergeant thought worthy of notice.

"Rummy old geezers they used to be," commented Mr. Smith, as his eyes rested on a page of faded representations of husbands and wives of a past generation. "I've got some at home o' my own father and mother which were taken before I was born, fift—nigh on forty-five years since. They couldn't have been more than five-and-twenty, but look as old as Mathusalam."

"Was *he* old?" inquired Sam indifferently.

Mr. Smith removed his pipe and spat into the fire; recollected himself and pretended to clear his throat. Ellen, however, was in the scullery, and nothing happened.

"Old as a he elephant," he explained in answer to Sam's inquiry. "He couldn't die seemingly, so they sent for him in a chariot o' fire. It's in t' Bible."

The statement was made in a low tone of voice, because the sergeant realised that it was open to correction, but Sam regarded it as humour.

"Don't 'urt yourself wi' thinking of any more," he said; and Mr. Smith glared at him for a moment, but thought it best to drop the subject.

Nothing more was said for a moment or two, and the sergeant continued to turn over the leaves indifferently. One of the openings was torn, and as he removed a photograph in order to put it straight a smaller one that had slipped down behind it was partially revealed. Mr. Smith drew it out, and Sam, chancing to look into his companion's face, saw a new

expression come over it, and followed the direction of the puzzled eyes. They were fixed upon a small vignette that had apparently something familiar about it. It was much more modern than most of the others and portrayed a young man with a mass of heavy light-coloured hair and a moustache and beard, ornately trimmed. The pose of the head and the gleam in the eyes indicated self-complacency, if not coxcombry. The sergeant's eyes contracted to a frown.

"Thinks himself no small beer, that chap?" suggested Sam.

"Where the devil have I seen that face before?" muttered the sergeant.

"You needn't swear on Sunday evenings anyway," said Gertie; and Ellen, overhearing the remark, said "Frank!" in a shocked and admonitory tone of voice.

"I wasn't swearing," the sergeant explained. "It isn't swearing to name the devil, is it? Besides I wasn't thinking what I was saying. I seem to sort o' know this face. Who is the fellow?"

Gertie looked over his shoulder, and the blood left her cheeks. The sergeant could not see her, but she looked at Sam and was annoyed to find that he was looking at her.

"It's a man I used to know," she said hurriedly; "but that's years ago, and he left the country. I can't think what it's been left in the album for."

She threw an uneasy look at her sister, who was standing beside the table, and who seemed surprised at Gertie's discomposure. She said nothing, however, but bade the men draw up their chairs. Gertie put the albums away and set a crocheted mat and a glass

ornament upon them, and nothing more was said about the gentleman.

When Sam went to bed the man with the beard went with him and disturbed his slumbers. The more he tried to dismiss him the more he obtruded himself, and Sam could almost have sworn that he stood at the foot of the bed winking at him derisively when he endeavoured to determine whether, and if so when, he had seen the fellow before. When he awoke in the morning "Bluebeard," as he called him in his thoughts, was still there, and when he went downstairs at an early hour to black the boots he carefully removed the mat and opened the album in order to have another look at the haunting face. It was not there; it was not in any of the albums; and Sam became thoughtful. When he came back from work that evening a workbox had taken the place of the albums on the chest of drawers.

Three days later Sam, driving the car through the crowded traffic near the Town Hall, observed a hand beckoning to him from the middle of the road, and as it projected from the blue sleeve of a policeman's tunic he pulled up and leaned over the side.

"Sergeant Smith wants you," said the officer, nodding his head in the direction of the Charge Office, and Sam went there.

The sergeant was busy, but he found time to take Sam to a quiet corner in the corridor.

"How's Ellen?" he inquired perfunctorily.

"In the pink," Sam answered, somewhat surprised by his patron's solicitude. "Writing po'try about love and bobbies in 'er spare time."

"Go to the devil," the sergeant grunted. "Can

you keep your mouth shut, or will you blurt out what I tell you to those women?"

"Mum's the word," replied Sam.

The sergeant looked fixedly at him.

"Can you get hold o' the photo of that chap with the whiskers?" he asked. "Just for an hour or so, and bring it down here. I want to have another look at it."

Sam shook his head.

"Can't be done," he said. "The chap wi' the whiskers hopped it that same night."

"How do you mean 'hopped' it?"

"Did a guy : cut his sticks." Then, as an after-thought and with a grin—"Went away in a chariot of fire," which was truer than Sam knew.

The sergeant put his hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Look here, my lad," he said impressively, "I want that photo if it's to be got. If they've shifted it it stands to reason they did it to keep it out o' my way and prevent awkward questions. If you come across it, bring it down here, and whether or no see if you can find out where the chap is. And mum's the word, as you say."

"Is he like someb'dy i' your picture book?" inquired Sam daringly.

"Don't you ask questions," the sergeant replied. "I did you one good turn. You can do me one now if you've a mind. But this is on the Q.T., you understand?"

Sam drove away with Bluebeard on the seat beside him. He was willing enough to oblige the sergeant but quite determined not to play traitor to the Mellors.

"Why can't he get it out of Ellen?" he asked himself crossly. "He don't get me to do his dirty

work for 'im, no fear. But I've seen the chap somewhere, blest if I 'aven't; and I'll ferret it out before I've done with it."

He might have pursued this line of thought until the Emporium had been reached if he had not nearly run into some newsboys who were pouring from the distributing office of the *Evening News*. The language with which he was assailed hurled Bluebeard from his seat, and the large type announcements on the posters gave a new turn to his thoughts. A moment later fifty voices were spreading the news in all directions—"End of the Great Strike."

Sam's heart gave a bound. He was on his way to the shop, and regardless of speed limits and of all other considerations but one, he let the car rip and drove to No. 7, Brick Row.

Without stopping the engine he jumped from his seat and opened the door. Mrs. Tickle was still in bed, and Maud Annie and Cissie were having tea. Sam threw the *Evening News* on to the table.

"T' strike's over," he said. "Hooray! Pip-pip!" and without another word he closed the door behind him and drove off.

CHAPTER XIX

DAISY VISITS MRS. TICKLE.

WHILST Sergeant Smith was impersonating the lover with no great enthusiasm, Mr. Knox in the rôle of artful dodger was thoroughly enjoying himself and in danger of over-acting the part. He had taken Jonas into his confidence, but had not added to that equable young man's ease of mind by doing so. Jonas did not want anybody to do his courting for him, and he was quite convinced that Daisy was only temporarily dazzled by Lycester's brilliance, and might be trusted to act sensibly when her mental sight should have become normal. Jonas's own vision was very clear, and he distrusted craftiness and subterfuge.

"I say," he said one evening, "aren't you laying it on just a bit too thick? If I were Daisy I should smell a rat."

Mr. Knox stroked his knee complacently.

"You leave me alone," he said. "It's worked wonders, this scheme has. I was put up to this by a party who knows as much about girls and their ways as a whole street of men."

Jonas pulled at his pipe and reflected.

"It's all right, I daresay, up to a certain point," he said, "but you're so keen on Lycester that you'll make Daisy think she's breaking the fifth commandment if she chucks him."

Mr. Knox smiled. He thought he knew Daisy, and he said so, adding that his one concern was to get her to do the chucking, and to do it expeditiously.

"How are things going at the shop?" Jonas inquired, and Mr. Knox frowned.

"He carries on as if the whole blooming place belonged to him : lords it over the lot of 'em and lets 'em see who's boss. I thought he'd got a bit of a set-back after that New Year's Day snub, but whether she's made it up with him or no I don't know; but he's got a darned sight more impudent lately, and if it wasn't for thinking of the time when I shall take him by the scruff o' the neck and his trousers seat and throw him into the road, I should boil over."

Jonas looked thoughtful.

"There you are, you see. Daisy must have smoothed him down. She's maybe afraid she'll grieve you as you crack him up so. You're overdoing it. Why not be open with her? Tell her you've found him out and you're going to sack the chap."

"Then she'd be sorry for him and there's no telling what 'ud happen. Besides, I haven't found him out, and what excuse is there for sacking him? You can't sack a chap on suspicion that he's seeking a partnership; and even Sam can't find anything wrong with the fellow though he follows him like a weasel."

Jonas looked across inquiringly. He knew more about Sam's activities in this direction than Mr. Knox did, but he was not going to say so. "What does Sam bother his head about him for?" he asked.

Mr. Knox looked slyly at his companion. Jonas's artless air did not deceive him.

"Because he thinks he's a wrong 'un. I can see he does, though he's never said a word to me. of

course; and besides he thinks I'm between Bert's thumb and finger and he's sorry for me. That suits my game down to the ground. Sam's set himself on as a detective and he thinks he's going to save me."

He laughed as he said this, but did not explain that his eyes had been opened in this matter by Mrs. Tickle.

"We sha'n't make a scholar of Sam," said Jonas. "He'll never hear the Bow bells. He's no ambition to be Lord Mayor of London. I haven't been able to teach him much, though he's perhaps a bit more careful over his aspirates."

"Somebody teaches him things," said Mr. Knox, with his eyes on the cornice. "How he does it I don't know, but I'll swear it's nobody else who's always giving Bert starts. Why, when he lifted the lid of his inkpot the other day the ink began to boil as if there was a fire under it and he nearly fell off his stool. Somebody must put him up to it, and I wouldn't be in his shoes if Bert catches him at it."

Mr. Knox's personal pronouns had got mixed badly, but Jonas had no difficulty in sorting them out, and he did not change colour, though Mr. Knox had brought his eyes down and was looking at him whimsically.

"He's sharp enough to pick up anything that he fancies," he said. "Sam amuses me. He likes the by-ways of knowledge better than the beaten tracks."

Daisy was in the drawing-room alone whilst this conversation was proceeding. It was true that she had been rather more gracious to Mr. Lycester since the occasion her father had referred to, but there had been a difference in her manner and bearing all the same. She was more polite than she had been formerly, and

more distant; but Bert put his own construction on this changed attitude and regarded it as a sort of sham armour donned in anticipation of the direct attack upon her heart that a girl of her discrimination must have anticipated. He had not visited the house quite so frequently, believing that absence might be relied upon to make the heart grow fonder; but he had sent her a small volume of Imagist poetry for her birthday and had enclosed a note which gave his views on Imagism, and which contrived to be suggestively tender at the same time. He had expended a couple of shillings on the book, but the views had cost him nothing, because he had stolen them ready-made from a review that he had seen at the Free Library, where he still hunted occasionally for the latest information on art.

Daisy was reading the book instead of sitting in the breakfast-room and listening to its donor's praises. She was also mentally comparing the gift with Jonas's chocolates and bottle of scent. She liked the book—in parts—but she liked the chocolates without exception. By-and-by she abandoned Imagism and gave herself up to thought.

She wondered what Jonas and her father were talking about. Was it the everlasting subject of the improvement at the shop under Bert's strict rule? If so Jonas would be sick of it. She was sorry for Joe, who was so patient and long-suffering, and she was rather sorry for her father. It was sad to see a man of his years so infatuated; it was particularly sad that he should allow himself to be guided by one so much younger than himself as Bert. Of course Bert had his good points, and her father seemed to think he would make her an excellent husband. He had never

said so, but there was no mistaking his meaning. Daisy never doubted her father's love, but she distrusted his judgment, as was natural seeing that Daisy was modern (twenty-four) and her father was ancient (fifty-four). Daisy's brow shewed a small pucker.

And yet, her father's judgment had served him well in the past; there was no denying that. Suppose he should be right! Perhaps these flaws that she objected to in Bert were only on the surface. Perhaps her father saw more deeply than she did after all. Daisy wavered. Undoubtedly Bert was a "hustler" at the Emporium. It was a word Daisy didn't like, and the passing thought caused her to toss her head a little. Her father mustn't think that she was to be hustled into marriage; she most certainly would not consent to be used as a cord to tie Mr. Lycester to the Emporium.

Besides, she had wondered once or twice if Bert sneered at her father. If it had not been quite that yet there had been a note of patronage in his voice that Daisy had resented. Somehow Daisy caught herself hoping that Bert would not teach her father to be as smart as himself. He was smarter already than he used to be, and it had not improved him. She wondered if he would be very grieved if she should refuse to marry Bert. It would make her unhappy to grieve her father, and Bert was certainly an attractive and entertaining man, interested in the very things that she found interesting, and Lycester was a nice name.

Peacock wasn't. Poor Joe! Daisy unclasped her hands from about her knees and selected another of his chocolates. It occurred to her that she must have

consumed thousands of chocolates that Jonas had paid for, but a girl couldn't be expected to marry a man because he had bought her sweets. She reflected that she had liked chocolates long before she had cultivated a taste for art, and on the whole they were more to her liking than Imagist poetry. Jonas, however, did not care for the things he gave her. He and she never sucked chocolates together as Bert and she turned over in their mouths (so to speak) choice morsels of art and poetry. Joe was awfully nice all the same, even if he was brusque and outspoken and disposed to laugh at her. He really was, or at any rate he used to be, a perfect dear, so thoughtful and sensible and manly; and if only his name had not been Peacock——!

The pucker deepened. Now that Jonas seemed out of favour with her father as a son-in-law Daisy caught herself being sorry for him and calling him "poor Joe!" She wondered if he would be heart-broken if she should agree to marry Bert, and if the situation would be very tragic. She tried to envisage it, but failed, because do as she would she could not conceive of Jonas as heart-broken. She knew he would feel his position keenly because he loved her very much, and would be sensible that the loss was irreparable (there was no reason why she should not be frank when she was talking to herself), but it was quite likely that he would shrug his shoulders and tell her he was sorry she had no more sense, and come in the next night to have a pipe with her father whilst she and Bert were arranging their plans in the drawing-room; and then marry some other girl after a decent interval.

It was horrid of Jonas, when they had been such old sweethearts and when it was all his fault for having

such a ridiculous name, and she tried to hiss the scene off the stage, forgetting for the moment that she was its author.

She did not sleep at all well that night, and her dreams brought her no comfort. How could they when Jonas was always sitting on a wall in his rough tweed suit wherever Bert and she walked arm in arm? Bert was wearing his frock coat with the inevitable flower in the button-hole, and was as immaculate as a figure in a fashion-plate; and it was very ungentlemanly of Joe to sit on the wall sniggering and dangling his legs and appearing to say "silly clown" beneath his breath every time they passed. Of course, dreams "go by contrary"—Daisy knew that, but she was irritable and out of sorts when she went down to breakfast and not a bit nearer to a decision. Yet a decision must be reached before evening, for Bert would be coming, and her woman's instinct told her that a formal proposal might be expected at any time now.

Nobody looking at Daisy's old leather satchel would have regarded it as the hiding-place of an oracle, but when such an enterprise as marriage is in question the gods lurk in all kinds of curious places.

Among her birthday presents was a new satchel—a magnificent arrangement in crocodile skin—and she spent a few minutes after lunch in transferring the contents of the old favourite to the new. In one of the pockets she found a folded paper which bore the inscription "No. 7, Brick Row," and she held it in her hand and fixed her eyes upon it for quite a long time before giving it into the keeping of the ex-crocodile. Then she put on her outdoor garments and went out into the warm May sunshine.

That long-promised visit to Mrs. Tickle was much overdue, and Daisy tried to think that she was ashamed of her neglect, and that it would be almost sinful to postpone the duty further. She knew all about the strike, and something of the suffering it had caused, and she knew also that Sam was still playing the part of special providence to Cissie because she continued to help him. Daisy's heart always began to glow at the thought of Sam: he was so open and generous, so devoted to Mrs. Tickle and her family, and so ardent a worshipper of his master's daughter—she would have been more than human if *that* consideration had not affected her. Whatever Bert or Jonas might think, she knew quite well that Sam took her to be only a little lower than the angels, and all Mr. Lycester's innuendos and open accusations never disturbed her faith in the boy. In fact, it must be admitted that the more Mr. Lycester grumbled at Sam the more Daisy distrusted Mr. Lycester. She did not put her reasons into words, but she no doubt could have done so, for Sam's honesty shone in his eyes, and his undoubted devotion to herself evidenced the soundness of his intuitions; besides which, her father, despite an occasional rough word in endorsement of his manager's opinion, manifestly liked Sam too. That had been one of Mr. Knox's failings: he could not bring himself to condemn Sam whole-heartedly.

From Sam, then, Daisy had heard a great deal about Mrs. Tickle, and she knew what a wise and wonderful woman the boy considered her, but she had quite forgotten that she was ill. Illness at "The Poplars" was such a rare occurrence that "sciatica" conveyed little or no meaning to the girl's mind. She hoped

Mrs. Tickle would be at home and alone so that she might have a long chat with her, provided, of course, Sam had not exaggerated or misrepresented her qualities, in which case the visit would be of short duration; and she walked briskly down the road with a very clear conception of what the chat was to be about.

When she came to the edge of the Brickfields she had to stop to inquire her way, and a bright-eyed but black-cheeked urchin who had a swollen jaw that had been accepted by the "kid-catcher" (the irreverent name bestowed upon the attendance officer) as a sufficient excuse for absence from school, volunteered his services as guide.

Daisy had never been in a locality like that before, and her heart sank a little as she picked her way daintily along the narrow streets and realised that scores of curious eyes were upon her, and heard the neighbours consulting each other as to the probable destination of the "toffed-up" stranger. Would Mrs. Tickle bear any resemblance to these unkempt, slatternly women? If so—but that surely was unthinkable.

When they came to No. 7 she rewarded the child with some coppers and knocked boldly on the inner door. A voice bade her enter, and she turned the handle and found herself in a room that at first seemed unoccupied—a very comfortable room, she noticed with a sense of relief, spotlessly clean and inviting. Perhaps the strong sunshine had dazzled her, for she did not see Mrs. Tickle until that lady's voice was raised from the far corner.

"If it's Sarah Tickle you're wanting, I'm 'ere i' bed."

"Oh!" The exclamation came from Daisy, and was long drawn out. "I'd quite forgotten you were poorly, though Sam told me."

"Then you're Miss Daisy?" inquired Mrs. Tickle, whereupon Daisy laughed and apologised for not introducing herself properly, and Mrs. Tickle laughed, and the ice, such as it was, was broken.

"It was so stupid of me," said Daisy; "but I lost my wits because I couldn't see anything of you."

If anyone had told Mr. Knox at that moment that his daughter was about to sit in an arm-chair that he had occupied more than once, and that in a few minutes she would be talking to Mrs. Tickle in the friendliest and most confidential manner imaginable, it is certain that he would have spent an uneasy afternoon; but he was in blissful ignorance, and the gods were working for him without his intervention.

Daisy wasted little time in beating about the bush. She chatted pleasantly for a short time about Sam and Cissie and asked a sympathetic question or two about the sciatica, and then went straight to the heart of things.

"Sam thinks you're the most motherly woman God ever made," she said, with a smile that Mrs. Tickle thought bewitching, "and that you can see your way out of every difficulty, so I've come to ask you if you can help me to find a way out of mine, as I've no mother of my own."

Mrs. Tickle's heart warmed to the girl.

"Sam's naught but a lad," she said, "and it's little enough he knows about mothers, more's the pity, and 'e's got daft notions about what I can do 'at won't bide looking at. But I was born before you, right

enough, and if I can 'elp you I will, so now tell us all about it."

She closed her eyes from an instinctive feeling that it would give her companion a better chance, and Daisy told her. She particularly emphasised her father's attitude towards one of the candidates for her affections, and in spite of her aching leg Mrs. Tickle could scarcely restrain her laughter.

"I'm afraid dad expects——" Daisy was concluding, when Mrs. Tickle opened her eyes and interrupted her.

"Now let's get that out o' t' road first. It isn't what your dad expects 'at you've got to go by. Choosing a 'usband isn't same as choosing a dinner, when it won't matter in a week's time whether it was a leg o' mutton or a bit o' brisket. You could give in to your dad about things o' that sort, but it's diff'rent wi' husbands; you've got to live wi' 'em, and that isn't as funny as some thinks."

She paused, but only for a moment or two.

"Are you sure you like either of 'em well enough to wed 'em?" she asked softly. "There's no 'urry for you to be married, and if you aren't sure about yourself you want to tell 'em both off. One o' these days someb'dy 'll come along 'at'll make you go 'ot all over, and you'll be afraid 'at 'e 'appen *won't* ask you, and you'll be all in a tremble when you think 'e's coming to t' point, and your dad can go to Jericho for all you'll care, and you won't take t' trouble to find out what an old body like me thinks, neither. And whether it's to be 'eaven or 'ell you'll decide for yourself; but you've got a good 'eart, and if you'll trust it and not try to work it all out i' your 'ead I don't think you'll go far wrong."

Mrs. Tickle's voice had faltered a little and Daisy's eyes filled—she did not know why.

“Now *your* heart is speaking,” she said. “You’ve been there, haven’t you? It must have been hard for you to lose your husband when you loved like that.”

Mrs. Tickle's face saddened, but she did not hesitate.

“Yes, I’ve been there,” she said, “but I didn’t wed ’im ’at made me feel that way. You’re t’ first I’ve ever told, for even our Maud Annie doesn’t know it. I wed one I cared naught for, and I wed ’im wi’ my eyes open and supped sorrow i’ canfuls. Don’t you ever do it, my lass. There was reason why I did it: there’s none i’ your case.”

Daisy's colour had changed, and she now laid her hand upon the one that was resting upon the counterpane and pressed it.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’ve pained you, haven’t I? But it was good of you to tell me.”

“Nay,” said Mrs. Tickle. “I’m not one ’at frets over might-ha’-beens, but if I slip on a bit o’ orange peel I like to kick it off t’ causeway chance anybody else falls. Some ’urts themselves badly, and I couldn’t like you to be one of ’em.”

Daisy's cheeks had regained their colour—indeed, the pink in them had deepened to rose before she said—

“Do you know, Mrs. Tickle, you’ve made me feel awfully small and mean, and I must tell you something more. I’m afraid I do feel rather hot and uncomfortable with one of the men, and so I keep out of his way, because I shouldn’t like him to know it for worlds. And—you’ll think me awfully silly and childish, but it’s his name that I don’t like. I just couldn’t bear to be Mrs. Jonas Peacock.”

She looked hard at Mrs. Tickle, but not a muscle of that lady's face moved.

"I' this district," she said after a pause, "they call a sovereign a 'quid' and a 'a'penny a 'meg.' I like 'meg' better nor 'quid' myself, but t' first is worth a toathri 'underd o' t' second, and I should be ready for t' 'sylum if I was to pick t' meg i'stead o' t' quid 'cos I liked t' name better. Names are naught, my lass, and love's everything."

She removed her hand from underneath Daisy's and grasped the girl's in a grip that was full of meaning.

"Let your 'eart speak—not your pride."

Daisy's heart was speaking, and Mrs. Tickle gave it its opportunity. At length she spoke again.

"They call t' other man Mr. Bert Lycester, don't they?"

Daisy nodded.

"Do you know what Sam and them at t' shop calls 'im?"

Daisy shook her head.

"Blister!"

"Blister?" Daisy's eyes opened wide.

"Yes. 'Ow'd you like that for a nickname?" Mrs. Tickle pressed the girl's hand again.

"You've come to me for 'elp, and 'appen I 'ave 'elped you. But your 'eart's told you all t' time which way it was pulling. Take 'im 'at's proved 'imself true, my lass; 'im 'at loves you and 'at you love, choose what they call 'im. And it can't be worse nor Tickle, can it, unless it was Scratch?"

Cissie came in at that moment, followed by Louisa's mother, who was supposed to keep an eye on the invalid and who had been dying of curiosity for a whole hour. Cissie guided Daisy to the main road,

and was a shy and engaging companion, but Daisy's thoughts were not with the child, but with the child's mother, and with "Blister," who would be coming to see her, she felt sure, that evening.

CHAPTER XX

MR. KNOX AND SAM EACH MAKE A DISCOVERY.

THE first day of June was simply gorgeous. The sun rose at an early hour, and having given the clouds holiday proceeded to pour his rays upon the earth, so that the very puddles were glorified. The soot-stained buildings in the city borrowed the summer radiance, and were almost unrecognisable, like wolves in sheep's clothing. Sparrows and starlings and pigeons enjoyed themselves after their manner and were not careful to conceal their enjoyment. Even the Brickfields looked clean and in some parts almost gay, and the cats leaped on to the window sills, where their enemies the terriers allowed them to sleep undisturbed.

Sam's spirits responded to the call of Nature as he walked up to the Emporium. His hands were thrust deep into his trousers pockets and his cap was set far back on his head, and he whistled the notes of a popular melody as he swung along. He had not a care in the world, for Mrs. Tickle was getting better and Cissie was remarkably well, and Blister had been almost agreeable the last week or two. Moreover he had another idea in his head which he meant to impart to Mr. Knox at the first favourable opportunity. Grammar and arithmetic and the other things Dr. Peacock provided for his mental nourishment were as dry as bran, but ideas that could be worked out and

made to materialise into substantial productions of wire and wood were like wine to his soul. His head was full of bent wire as he whistled his shrillest, and his heart was full of the early morning sunshine.

Mr. Knox, walking smartly down to business a couple of hours later, was neither artist nor poet, but he was not insensible to the coquetry of summer. He was feeling more than usually pleased with himself, for Daisy had been almost demonstratively affectionate when she kissed him, and something she had let drop during breakfast convinced him that his policy with regard to Bert was the right one whatever Jonas might say. When the recollection of Bert's impudence ruffled him Mr. Knox soothed himself with the thought, inspired by the blue heavens and the glittering earth, that it was a good world after all, and that when a sensible fellow like himself kept his head and exercised a wise diplomacy things were bound to turn out right.

Mr. Lycester, who had reached the shop an hour earlier than his master, and whose artistic temperament should have led him to dance to Nature's piping, was manifestly out of tune with his surroundings. His looks were as black as his hair, and the scowl on his forehead was portentous of stormy weather indoors, however bright the day outside.

Sam looked at him and sniggered.

"Blister's got out o' bed on to t' oilcloth this morning," he whispered to one of the young women.

The storm broke within five minutes, and naughty words that no Imagist should have employed so freely accompanied the thunderclap of his orders like tropical lightning.

"There must ha' been a tack on t' oilcloth," Sam

whispered again, and Mr. Lycester caught sight of his face.

"What are you grinning at, you blithering idiot?" he shouted; and Sam, removing himself to a safe distance, and making his features as expressionless as an owl's, replied—

"I was thinking of something funny, sir. It just came over me same as t' cramp in t' stomach. It's gone now."

Three young women who were counting the number of china dolls contained in certain cardboard boxes were ill-advised enough to titter, and Mr. Lycester's language for the next sentence or two was unprintable. The girls were frightened, and Sam begged the manager's pardon with an earnestness that somehow was not appeasing. Then there was silence, except for the rustle of paper and the subdued clink of the dolls' bodies as the women went on with their work.

Sam was set to count the expensive toys that were kept in wooden boxes on the top shelves. From the giddy eminence of the high steps he called out the stock number and the quantity, and Mr. Lycester entered the particulars on the ruled sheets of paper that were before him on the counter. The annual stock-taking took place at the end of May and had been almost completed the previous day, but a few shelves on the ground floor had been left over, as Mr. Lycester had promised himself an evening at "The Poplars," and had not been inclined to forego the pleasure.

When Mr. Knox entered and greeted everybody with a cheery "Good morning," Sam turned to look at him.

Mr. Lycester's face had assumed the strained

expression which the photographer's entreaty to look pleasant used to call forth in the days when photographers knew no better. He had been resting his chin on one hand as he leaned over the counter, and as he now looked up and replied to his employer's greeting Sam's heart gave a great bound. In spite of the difference in the shade of the hair, and in spite of the absence of a beard, the resemblance to the missing photograph was unmistakable. The puzzle that had occupied his brain in competition with the other puzzle that was to become a thing of wire and steel was a puzzle no longer.

Sam turned to his work and all the fun went out of him. Something continued to count and to call out the results, but it seemed like a stranger who had come to his help so that he might devote himself to the thoughts that crowded before him for attention. What did it all mean? Who was Mr. Lycester, and what was the connection between him and the Mellors? Sam had not reached a conclusion when he was summoned to Mr. Knox's office.

It was the first day of a new financial year, and Mr. Knox signalled it by raising Sam's wages. That was good, but the words of appreciation that accompanied the announcement gave Sam even more satisfaction. He had been so preoccupied with the thoughts born of the recent revelation that he was actually about to leave the office without mentioning the great idea when it suddenly jostled itself to the front.

Mr. Knox let his eye travel to the slit in the green curtain and smiled as he saw Mr. Lycester's head turned expectantly towards the door of the private office. Then he bade Sam draw a chair up to the table.

An hour passed before Sam was released, and ever and anon Mr. Knox looked into the shop and returned to the problem before him with an inward chuckle. Bits of bent tin and strips of steel had been pushed to one side, and the real interest lay in a sheet of paper which contained several designs for a new mechanical toy. They were very crudely done, but Mr. Knox's trained eye, which had been quick to note defects and impossibilities, had been just as quick to recognise genius, and he was now as interested as his protégé in endeavouring to overcome difficulties.

"It'll work, Sam!" he exclaimed at length. "I've got it! Blow the puzzles. We shall make money out of this contraption. See, man! It's as simple as falling off a plank," and he made a few strokes with his pencil that brought the light back to Sam's eyes.

"You leave it to me," said Mr. Knox as he folded the paper and put it in his breast pocket. "I'll go into this at home. You keep your wits polished, my lad, and I'll see you get your share of the rhino."

Sam grinned. He had never many words in Mr. Knox's presence.

"And now," said his boss with a wink, "you'd better take this pin-cushion and count how many pins there are in it, and when you get outside you can tell Mr. Lycester you've been helping me to take stock."

It was not high morality, but Sam regarded it as an almost perfect example of wit and scrupulosity, and he replied to the manager's questions with a perfectly solemn face two minutes later.

Mr. Knox's enthusiasm got the better of his subtlety that evening as he sat in the breakfast-room and pored over the plans.

"I'll tell you what it is, Daisy," he said. "That

young beggar of a Sam Munday's going to be worth more to me than all the rest of the blooming show put together. If you'll promise not to tell Bert I'll let you see something."

Daisy tossed her head.

"Why should you keep it from him?" she asked.

"Because I'm not going to give away secrets to a damned fool," he replied hotly.

Daisy's eyebrows expressed two notes of astonished interrogation.

"When did he change into a damned fool?" she inquired sweetly. "I thought he had the wisdom of Solomon, and that the firm would go bankrupt if he were to leave it?"

The note of sarcasm did not escape her father, and as he did not know what it might mean he told himself that he was in the devil of a mess.

"Would it?" he contented himself with replying. "The firm is Caleb Knox, not Knox and Lycester, nor yet Lycester and Knox, and what's more," he continued, with rising wrath, "it isn't going to be, though I fancy he thinks the deed's as good as drawn up. I'm just about fed up with the chap."

Daisy turned to the tea cosy she was embroidering and surveyed her coloured silks with a critical eye.

"Don't you think there are two shades of brown here?" she asked, as she coolly divided a skein before his eyes and held it out to him.

Mr. Knox went up to the window and declared that he couldn't tell 't' other from which, and Daisy professed herself satisfied. She had required a short interval in which to review the situation.

"I wouldn't be too sure about Mr. Lycester's intentions," she remarked with perfect self-possession.

"He did not behave very well last night, and I had to be rather severe with him. Perhaps he has been feeling sore to-day, and you must make allowances, and be just to him."

Mr. Knox put down his pencil and stared at his daughter; then left the table and sat down in his easy chair. His pipe was on the mantelpiece, and he filled it before anything more was said.

"Look here, Daisy," he began; "have you chucked the silly idiot or is it just a tiff that you'll make up to-morrow?"

"I want you to tell me when he became a damned fool and a silly idiot," Daisy replied. She really did not know what to make of her father, and she was not going to commit herself. Mr. Knox was in a similar predicament, but inclined to show his hand now that he had dropped some of his cards. He looked across at Daisy, who was filling in a green leaf with perfect composure, and he realised that he was himself both hot and moist. He wished he had rehearsed the scene in private, but there was nothing for it now but to go ahead, so he drew out his handkerchief and wiped his face and spent more time in blowing his nose than was at all necessary.

Daisy looked up, but only for a second.

"We were speaking about Mr. Lycester," she said.

"So he's 'Mr. Lycester,' is he?" Mr. Knox began.

"Seems to me, Daisy, you and me's changed his name about the same time. Has he been asking you to marry him?"

"Of course he has," Daisy replied.

"Then all I can say is it's like his damned impudence." Mr. Knox, like many another man, resorted to strong language to hide his weakness.

"But surely," Daisy commented, with a very slight elevation of the eyebrows, "you must have known that he would do so for a long time. It was plain enough, and I'm sure I thought you encouraged him. You were always singing his praises anyhow."

"Nonsense," replied her father. "You couldn't see when I was stuffing you. I sweetened him so as to turn your stomach. Me sing his praises! It 'ud be a blooming comic song, that would. I don't say there's any vice in the chap, Daisy, but he's a silly parrot, and I'd as soon you married a——"

Mr. Knox halted to search for a word, and Daisy, with slightly heightened colour, suggested "a Peacock?"

"Look here, Daisy," said Mr. Knox. "Can't we get down to rock-bottom with this business? What's the matter with Jonas? Mind you, he hasn't asked me to put in a word for him, and I guess he'd be jolly mad if he thought I was doing, but he thinks the world of you and he'd make you a good husband. As for the other fellow, he is a damned fool, you can say what you like; and Daisy, my lass, I should grieve all the rest of my life if you were to have him."

A note of tenderness thrilled in Mr. Knox's voice, and Daisy dropped her work on to the basket and went and sat on her father's knee. It was months since she had done that, and when she wound an arm about his neck Mr. Knox felt that the crisis was past and his emotional heart filled at once.

"You're short of a mother at a time like this," he went on, as Daisy did not speak but played gently with his ear. "A man's naught but a fool at these jobs, and gropes like a fellow in a fog, and though I'd have

liked to act a mother's part to you as well as your dad's, I haven't known how to go about it.

"But you see, Daisy, you're all I have, and if it wasn't for you I don't know that I should care very much how soon I was to go; for if the best man there is was to get you—and there's hundreds better than me—he couldn't think more of you than I thought of your mother. And when you sit on my knee and play with my ear it's just as she——"

He stopped, and Daisy bent down and kissed his head, but did not speak, and after a while her father continued—

"That was before you were born, and when you were too little to notice, but she did it now and again right up to the end. Nobody ever taught you to play with my ear: it's a way you got from your mother, and you've a hundred other little habits that are just her over again. So you see, Daisy, it's like as if you're two in one to me, and I love you for two, and if anybody was to spoil your life for you it 'ud mean either me killing him or him killing me. And, Daisy ——"

"Yes, dad, I'm listening."

"I don't trust Bert. He may be clever, and I don't deny he's smart, but—don't you marry him, Daisy."

The arm tightened about his neck and a soft voice whispered "I won't, father."

"That's right," Mr. Knox sighed. "I don't ask you to tell me all about it because perhaps you'd feel awkward, and I'm sure I should. And, of course, you'll please yourself about Jonas and forget that I mentioned him. It was only a man's blundering way. But if you care to tell me bits of things when you're fast with yourself I'll see if I can help you to

straighten them out. And if Bert did anything he shouldn't have done you've only to speak——."

"He was very rude, and I was just boiling, dad, but it's been my own fault, and we won't say any more about it. I'm quite well able to look after myself if I have been foolish over that man; and I'll forgive you for deceiving me, because I'm so glad you didn't mean what you said; and you're a dear, and I won't grieve you any more as long as I live, except when I forget, and then you'll forgive me because I shall be very sorry. And Mr. Lycester must keep to the shop now and make things hum there; he won't be able to make them hum here any longer. And, dad, let me whisper in your ear—he's both a silly idiot and—the other thing."

CHAPTER XXI

FATHER DOHERTY.

“WELL,” said Mrs. Tickle, “it’s grand to be about again, though my right leg feels same as a borrowed ’un ’at isn’t fairly used to its job, but my tongue ails naught, and that’s a blessing when you’ve such as yond to deal wi’.”

She sank into her arm-chair and fanned herself, and Sam, who had only just come in and had not got the hang of the situation, was eager for enlightenment. Cissie went up to her mother as if to convince herself that she had returned whole, and Maud Annie leaned against the table and dropped interjections and explanations as circumstances required.

“She reckons to tell us ’at it’s ‘Blessed are the peacemakers,’ and then she goes and turns herself into a bobby, and I’ll bet aught they’ll bring her home on a shutter one o’ these days. I see no sense in having a finger in everybody’s pie. Let folks settle their own quarrels. It’s ‘Oh, Number Seven, come here’ or ‘Oh, Sarah, run there!’ till it’s fair sickening.”

“Some folks is soon sickened,” Mrs. Tickle replied. “If you’d stir about and lend a ’and to your neighbours you needn’t pay to see pictures—you could both see ’em and act in ’em for naught.”

Mrs. Tickle laughed quietly as some scene replayed itself before her eyes, and she continued—

“ It’s t’ best bit o’ peacemaking I’ve done for many a long day, and t’ fun you get out of it is worth all t’ risk; and as for t’ shutter business, it’s time enough to print your funeral cards when you’re dead.”

“ You’ll die before your time by t’ way you’re going on,” said Maud Annie.

“ Well anyway I shan’t die no more nor once,” retorted Mrs. Tickle. “ You’ll die many a ’underd times wi’ t’ thought on ’t.”

“ But what was it?” persisted Sam.

“ Well, you see,” Mrs. Tickle explained; “ When Sooty’s at ’is worst ’e’s same as them we read of i’ t’ Book ’at were possessed wi’ devils, and e’s been bad to get on wi’ lately. Right enough ’is wife’s a menseless sort o’ body and ’is childer’s a lot o’ young imps, but then you don’t get grapes off thorns and figs off thistles, and you can’t expect little angels off such as Sooty and ’is missus.

“ You’ll ha’ seen their Peter—’e’s naught but a lath of a lad, but ’e’s sperrit in ’im, and ’e sticks up for ’is mother when Sooty goes a bit too far.

“ Well, what they’d been ’aving up I don’t know, but their Jane nipped across to say ’at in another two minutes ’er father ’ud ha’ kicked t’ life out o’ Peter, so I went over.”

Cissie stroked her mother’s hand and drank in every word. It was evident that she had not to go outside the home to find her heroine.

“ There’s one sort o’ man I never am frightened on,” continued Mrs. Tickle, “ and that’s big bullies. I suppose they’ve only t’ same amount o’ sperrit dealt out to ’em as anybody else, and they’ve to fill up wi’

bluster same as 'im I could find you about in t' Bible 'at was killed wi' a pebble."

"Goliath," whispered Cissie.

"So it was, love," replied her mother. "When I was a little un I used to remember it by 'Go lie o' t' earth'—same as if David 'ad said it to 'im.

"Well, when I went in I thought t' lad was done for and t' father was using his foot same as if it went by clockwork, and 'is wife was pulling at 'is arm and shrieking like a mad woman."

"What did you do?" Sam asked. The only novelty in the incident was a woman's intervention.

"I clenched my fist and 'it 'im in t' bread basket," said Mrs. Tickle, "and 'e doubled up same as a safety pin. I could find you where it says there's a time for everything, and I thought it was time to take 'is wind and I took it. 'E bellowed like a bull, but when I 'it that sort I 'it 'ard, and before 'e could fairly get 'is wits back I says : 'Now, one of you run and bring Father Do'erty; 'e's the man to deal wi' this gentleman.' "

"Of course nob'dy stirred, but I could see a change come over 'is face, and I stood up to 'im like a Trojum."

Maud Annie's face was pale, and it expressed despair. She knew her mother was incurable, and she glanced at Sam in search of sympathy, but did not find it. Sam's expression was that of appreciation and admiring interest.

"'E fell back in a chair," Mrs. Tickle continued, "and I stood over 'im and told 'im a toathri things I 'ad on my mind. I thank the Lord every day for t' gift o' words 'at comes as free as water when I turn

t' tap on, and 'as been worth more to me nor any knuckle-duster."

Again Mrs. Tickle laughed softly, and Cissie smiled and drew up a low stool on which she seated herself close to her mother's knee. Maud Annie's eyes did not lose their look of care, and she seemed excited and unable to keep still.

"I'm terrified of something happening to you," she said. "I think about you many a dozen times in t' day when I'm at t' mill and wonder what you're having up." She spoke truth; it was the one absorbing fear of Maud Annie's life—a fear she had never been able to conquer.

Mrs. Tickle turned her head and changed her tone.

"Well, don't wear a 'ole in your skirt wi' wriggling again' t' table, but sit you down i' Cissie's chair and rock yourself till your nerves is steady. It's to be 'oped you don't wed a soldier, for you'd always want to sit on 'is gun chance 'e wanted to use it."

Maud Annie had no intention of marrying a soldier, as Sam very well knew, for he was aware that the smart young fellow who had seemed of late to find a good deal of pleasure in the girl's company was employed in the office at the mill where she worked. This was private information, however, and besides he was anxious to hear the rest of Mrs. Tickle's story.

"But what about Father Do'erty?" he asked, as Maud Annie drew up the chair and began to rock herself.

"Father Do'erty is t' Cath'lic priest," Mrs. Tickle explained. "Not 'im wi' t' long legs and tassels on 'is 'at—that's Father o'Morne—but t' little thin-faced un 'at looks as if 'e'd never sat down to a square meal

in 'is life—you'll 'ave seen 'im many a time. Poor man, my 'eart fair aches for 'im whenever I set eyes on 'im, and I went to t' door one day (but it's many a year sin') and calls after 'im 'Father Do'erty!'

" 'E comes back, 'olding a little cane in 'is 'and and I reckoned to ask 'im about a lass 'at I knew was a Cath'lic, and 'e answered me as gentle as a woman; and if you'll believe me I could count all t' tubes in 'is neck, and 'is 'ands—nay I could ha' cried to see 'em they were that wasted. Talk about a walking skeleton! why compared wi' 'im Mr. Long 'ud take a prize in a fat show.

" I'd 'appened to be baking, and I'd turned out as nice a lot o' queen cakes as you could wish to put your teeth into, and they were on t' dresser. So when 'e'd finished telling me I says to 'im—' I wish you'd just try one or two o' my queen cakes, and I'll pour you out a sup o' milk. You look fair spent,' I says, ' and there's naught in 'em to 'urt you.'

" Well, 'e looks at 'em and 'e says 'Oh no, I'm not spent, Mrs. Tickle, and I thank you very much for your kindness. I've a little work to do in the next street, but p'rhaps I'll look in again in a few minutes and then ——'

" 'Will you 'ave a cup o' tea when you come back?' I says, for I'd made up my mind 'at 'e should 'ave t' chance of a meal 'at 'ud put a bit o' colour into 'is blood, but 'e says, in a voice 'at was that soft and gentle you'd ha' thought it was a lady's—' Oh no, Mrs. Tickle, thank you, but I'll take one or two of your little cakes when I come back as you are so very kind.'

" So 'e makes a little bow and goes off down t' street, and I 'eard all t' tale from Louisa's mother

'at saw it wi' 'er own eyes. 'E went straight to Tim Sullivan's, that big lump of a man 'at keeps t' 'ouse where Lady Peggy lived and what 'appened inside I don't know, but there was such a 'ullabaloo as never, and after a bit Tim ran out into t' road wi' 'is coat off and Father Do'erty followed, thrashing 'im wi' t' little cane for all 'e was worth. They said you wouldn't ha' believed it if you 'adn't seen 'ow t' little man could lay on. Then they both went indoors, and after a while Father Do'erty came back wi' rather more red in 'is cheeks and 'e says, just as gentle as ever—"P'rhaps you'll allow me to take the little cakes wi' me, Mrs. Tickle"; and if you'll believe me I 'adn't a word to say. I put 'im 'alf a dozen in a paper bag and 'e muttered a few words 'at sounded like saying a grace; and I sent Thomas to spy after 'im.

"It was just as I thought. 'E turned in at that lass's I told you of, and when 'e came out 'e'd no bag in 'is 'and, and I never asked no questions."

"And what had Tim been doing?" asked Sam.

"I don't know," Mrs. Tickle replied, "but I don't think 'e'll ha' done it again in a 'urry; and when Sooty 'eard me tell 'em to fetch Father Do'erty he started whimpering and laying all t' fault on t' lad."

"They say the lad's a regular bad un," said Maud 'Annie; "and you'll go a bit too far one of these days, mother, and be sent to prison for interfering."

"Well, I shall go cheerful," replied her mother, "and you'll save my keep for a week. And as for t' lad 'e'd ha' been going wi' wings by now if I 'adn't gone in. It was a kindness to 'is father to empty 'is steam-chamber. 'E was trying to bring t' lad round when I came away. That's what I call being a peace-maker, Maud Annie."

Sam had been greatly interested and he returned to the subject on the Sunday evening when he was sitting with Mrs. Tickle and Cissie.

"Jiminy!" he said. "He was a grand parson, that Cath'lic chap you were telling us about, wasn't he? Do all parsons fight?"

"'E wasn't fighting," Mrs. Tickle explained, "'e was using t' cane same as a schoolmaster. I've never seen none o' t' others do it, and I don't think there's many 'at 'ud dare. But Father Do'erty 'ud face the devil I do believe."

"He'd be the man for my money if I was to turn religious," said Sam admiringly, "but I can't fairly reckon religion up. There's some come to see Ellen 'at 's fair bursting with it, and they send cold shivers down my back."

"Well if you ask me," said Mrs. Tickle, "them 'at's fair bursting wi' it is them 'at can't digest it and turns it to wind and bile. I could like you to read t' Book for yourself, Sam. You see I'm nob'dy to go by in t' matter o' religion, but by what I can make out it's good living and doing as you'd be done by 'at counts t' most."

"We've a very good parson at our church, but we 'ad a curate once 'at was as narrow as a threadpaper. 'E was a very stern-looking gentleman and a learned man by what they said. Well, there 'appened to be a young woman living two doors below us 'at 'adn't been no better nor what she ought to ha' been and I oft went in to see 'er, poor lass, and especially when she was laid on her back and no chance of 'er ever getting up again. And towards t' end she said she'd like to see a parson, and it chanced 'at 'is Nibs was coming down t' street when I got out, so I stopped 'im."

“ ‘Does she belong to t’ Church?’ ’e says, very stern.

“ ‘Nay, I don’t know,’ I says. ‘If she’s a label on I’ve never seen it, but I fancy she belongs to t’ same lot as ’im ’at t’ Good Samaritan looked after.’

“ ‘I only asked,’ ’e says, ‘’cos if she’s a dissenter you’d better get one o’ their ministers.’ ’Owever ’e went in to see t’ lass.”

“Is a dissenter a different kind o’ religion?” asked Sam. “Ellen and Gertie belong to them.”

“That’s more nor I can tell you,” replied Mrs. Tickle; “but for aught I’ve ever been able to see it’s t’ same bread but baked i’ diff’rent shaped tins. And to listen to some folks you’d think them ’at didn’t eat out o’ their mould ’ud be poisoned, but I call it all rubbish. I go by t’ loaf, not by t’ tin.”

“I like t’ chap ’at lays it on with a stick,” said Sam thoughtfully. “I wish Blister belonged t’ Cath’lics. I’d give a week’s wages to see Father Do’erty preach at him with his cane.”

Mrs. Tickle smiled and said nothing. Her thoughts often turned to Mr. Lycester and to Daisy (who had not been to Brick Row again) and she was curious to know how matters were progressing at “The Poplars.” She could not inquire, of course, for she had given no hint of what she had been told in confidence, and the others regarded Daisy’s visit as a mere act of courtesy. Sam was always ready to talk about her, and Mrs. Tickle now led the conversation in that direction, but the boy could not tell what he did not know, and all she learned was that Blister was becoming unendurable and that Mr. Knox was as blind as a bat to his subordinate’s evil qualities.

Not one word did he breathe of suspicions that he

had not dared to formulate. Sam was young but not in all respects inexperienced, and he knew how to keep his own counsel.

He had to interrupt a graphic description of Lycester's accomplishments as a bully to say " Good night " to Cissie, who still kissed him despite Thomas's reiterated taunt that she was a " kiss-baby." Maud Annie had sided with Thomas at first but latterly had been silent on the subject. Perhaps Sam was not far wrong when he connected this forbearance with the growing attentions of the young man from the office.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CAT PEEPS OUT OF THE BAG.

SAM'S face bore a worried look, but it would have been a mistake to conclude that he was unhappy. On the contrary his heart was beating more quickly than usual and the sensation was pleasurable. It was a feeling similar to that he occasionally experienced at the "Pictures" when Mr. Sherlock Holmes was obviously on the threshold of the great discovery that was to unmask the villain and vindicate the innocent. There was nobody to see Sam, but your genuine hero gets his thrills from his exploits and not from the plaudits of sightseers. Puzzles made out of bits of bent steel which not long before had seemed the most important things in existence now began to assume insignificant proportions. He was up against one of the big things of life, and he felt it in his bones as Mrs. Tickle felt a change in the weather.

The shop at the Emporium was darkened, for the blinds were down and Sam ought to have been well on his way to No. 7 where he had promised to have an early supper with the Tickle family, yet he sat on the end of the counter with his cap thrust far back on his head and dangled his legs as he gave himself up to concentrated thought. The shop keys were in his hand, but the door was locked and he was alone in the big building.

Sam reviewed the situation and recalled Mr. Lycester's words for the twentieth time: "I've seen that all's fast at the back, Sam. There's naught you have to stop for, is there?"

Something in Mr. Lycester's manner—something in his voice—perhaps something vibrating in the air—had made Sam suspicious. The manager was not usually so considerate, and Sam concluded that there must be some reason why he continued to shadow him until he was ready to leave. The boy was too shrewd however to reveal his thoughts and he had locked the door from the outside and accompanied Mr. Lycester (who had been remarkably affable) to the bottom of the street where their ways diverged, and had then sauntered off, whistling shrilly, and had resisted the temptation to look back, thought it had required an immense effort of will.

When he had turned the corner he paused, removed his cap and peeped round the edge of the building. Mr. Lycester was still standing on the curb and Sam waited until he saw him board his tram. Then he retraced his steps and returned to the shop, which he locked from the inside, and began his investigations.

The back door was fast, locked and bolted, and the key was in the lock. It was rather dark in the passage and Sam struck a match and at once noticed that the collapsible gate that protected the well of the hoist was not quite closed, and the hoist itself was standing a foot or more above the ground floor when it ought to have been sent down to the basement before the electric current had been cut off. This was Sam's work, which Mr. Lycester professed to have attended to, and the boy looked at the hoist for a moment or two as if he thought it might reveal the manager's

secret. Then he climbed into it and examined the sliding-door which opened into the street at the height of a dray.

It was made of iron and ought to have been secured by a strong iron peg, but the peg hung vertical at the end of its chain. Moreover, Sam noticed that the runners had been newly oiled. "Jiminy!" he said to himself, as he jumped down and stepped into the shop. Then he hoisted himself on to the counter and gave himself up to thoughts that thrilled.

By and by he got down and opened one of the cupboards at the back of the shop where the large dolls' houses were kept and spent a few minutes in readjusting the contents. Fortunately the stock was low, and when he climbed in and pulled the door along after him he found that he could kneel quite easily and even sit, provided he bunched his legs uncomfortably. Discomfort had no attractions for Sam, so he descended and schemed to clear the shelf altogether, and was thus enabled when he returned to sit with his back to the boards and his feet against the middle division. The doors ran smoothly in grooves, but the gods, who are thoughtful for their favourites, had caused one of the panels to crack horizontally in readiness for this hour, and Sam was provided with a peephole that commanded the whole area of the shop. He had now nothing to do but wait, because he had exhausted his thinking.

Sam had not been trained in the *dolce far niente* school, and he found the waiting hard: almost as hard as the shelf on which he was sitting—harder, indeed, because when an hour had gone by and nothing had happened Sam realised that he could mitigate the hardness of the shelf by removing his coat and sitting on it. Ten minutes later he lost all sense of discomfort

as he heard a noise from the direction of the hoist, and he brought all his senses to attention.

Everything happened exactly as he had anticipated. The sliding door had been opened and quickly closed again, and Sam, with his ear to the slit, distinctly heard the sound of the peg dropping into the slot. A second or two later the gate was pushed back, and the newcomer leaped lightly down and, crossing the passage, entered the shop.

It was of course Mr. Lycester, and after glancing curiously round and trying the front door to make sure that it was fast he drew a bunch of keys from his pocket and fitted them one by one into the lock of the private office. None of them served his purpose, so he seated himself on the counter as Sam had done and consulted his watch.

"Jiminy!" said Sam to himself; "who's the other party what he's waiting for?"

A chill crept up his back as the thought struck him that it might be Daisy. What if he should be discovered in that event? The Emporium would certainly have no further need of his services. The chill was succeeded by a heat wave, and for the first time he wished he had not embarked on the adventure. Fortunately he was not left long in doubt, for Mr. Lycester suddenly sprang down and went into the passage in response to a summons that Sam had not heard. He heard voices, however, and the sound of the bolt as it was pushed home again, and then the newcomer followed Mr. Lycester into the shop. Sam's heart stood still as he recognised Gertie.

Her first act was to burst into tears and her companion became angry and contemptuous.

"What the devil are you crying for?" he asked.

“ Do you think I’ve got time to waste drying your eyes? You always were a silly fool, Gertie, and too free with the water bucket. We’re here for business to-night, so dry up and let’s get to work.”

“ I can’t help it, Jack ——” Gertie began, but the other interrupted her angrily.

“ Here, stop that! There’s no Jack left and no Watson either. Bertram Lycester’s my name, and it’ll pay you to forget that I ever had another. There’s nobody to overhear us, I know, but you can’t be too careful, as it might slip out when there is. But we’ve wasted time enough over preliminaries. All I want to know is—Have you made up your mind to work with me without any more fuss, and can we settle down to our plans? We can go round the place in half an hour and see how the land lies. I shouldn’t have taken the risk of meeting you here but for that.”

“ I’ll die before I’ll help you,” said Gertie, with a sudden flash of spirit.

“ Oh no you won’t, Miss Spitfire. You’ll die, I hope, a long time after you’ve helped me, and you’ll go on helping me as long as I ask you. I’ll make you. D’ye hear,” he continued, raising his voice slightly and bending towards her with his eyes fixed on hers; “ I’ll make you. I’m going to have no nonsense. I’ll begin as I mean to go on. You’re in my power and you’ll do well to remember that.”

“ Don’t! don’t!” Gertie cried, covering her face with her hands. “ You shan’t make me.”

Mr. Lycester’s tone changed. “ Why you silly little thing,” he said gently, “ you know perfectly well you’ll do anything I ask you. You’ll never be happy unless you help me. I could make you in any

case, but you'll do it of your own free will because you love me."

"Love you!" Gertie removed her hands and clenched them. Her voice was low but full of passion. "Love you! I hate you! It's wicked to say it, but I should be glad to see you dead at my feet. I've never known a minute's peace since you followed me here, but just when I was beginning to breathe more freely you drop on me like this. Oh!"

The exclamation was a sob, and Sam heard the quick drawing of the girl's breath and the half-hysterical tapping of her foot on the linoleum.

Mr. Lycester was leaning against the counter. An ironical smile played on his features and he toyed carelessly with his gold watch-chain.

"Very pretty!" he said. "Admirably done, Gertie! By Jove, you're a regular actress, but you don't deceive me because you see I know you do love me. My dear child I have watched your face when you have not known it, and your face tells tales. Do you remember when I came up into the workroom with Daisy Knox? That touches you, does it? I thought it would. I never looked at you, my dear, but I saw that you would have liked to pluck the adorable Daisy's eyes out. Oh yes, I was very much amused, I assure you."

Gertie drew herself up and threw back her head. "Oh you hard-hearted wretch!" she exclaimed. "I did love you. God forgive me, after the cruel wrong you had done me I still loved you. And I was jealous, I know I was. But that is all dead, dead, and now I loathe you."

Mr. Lycester's fingers still twisted the gold guard about them: the smile still played on his face.

"I can bring the dead to life again," he said, languidly. "See!" He dropped his affected air and throwing his arms round the girl's neck forced her lips to his and held them there until her struggles ceased. Then he released her : almost pushed her from him.

She dropped on to one of the stools beside the counter and buried her face in her arms. Sam felt an almost irresistible impulse to leave his hiding-place and measure his strength against the manager's, but he instinctively felt that he could serve Gertie best by restraining himself. In another moment the girl looked up.

"You can conquer my body," she said, "but you can't conquer *me*. I hate you and I shall always hate you, and I pray God to save Miss Daisy from you. Poor girl! I nearly hated her once, but I'm not jealous of her now. I pity her with all my soul."

"Then it's pity wasted, my sweet," he replied, coolly. "I've finished with Daisy Knox. Do you think, you silly cuckoo, that I should have had any use for you if I hadn't? If I were boss of this concern I should be a reformed character, can't you see that? A gentleman of means! a child of fortune! Unfortunately that's off, and I won't trouble you with any explanations. I'm on my own again and out for a little revenge as well; and you and I, dear child, are going into partnership once more with every prospect of success."

"I was never your partner," protested Gertie. "You know you dragged me into it, and I was innocent—innocent as a baby."

"So you were," Mr. Lycester admitted, "and as green as grass—as refreshingly green as the spring-time, Gertie. I'll be generous and acknowledge it,

seeing there's nobody to hear. All the same, my dear, you helped me splendidly until things were becoming uncomfortably warm, and then I found you this pleasant berth and sent you away before any suspicion could fall upon you and so spared you all disastrous consequences. You're not as grateful as you ought to be, Gertie."

"You're cruel to me," the girl replied. "I don't believe you have a heart. I didn't know that the goods I packed for you were stolen. I didn't know that hundreds of people never got the things they paid for. You used me as your tool; and when I became suspicious and tried to escape you followed me."

Mr. Lycester laughed. "For a quiet religious girl, Gertie, you do the tragedy business splendidly. Now look here——" his tone became sharp and stern, and he seized an unwilling hand and held it. "All that is true enough but you'll not get anybody to believe it. They know I must have had a helper, but I was too fly for them. All the same if I'm caught you'll go too, but I'm not going to be caught; I'm too fly for them, yet; and you're going to help me because your saintly face and character are worth a fortune to me, and when this spot begins to get warm you'll clear out and I shall follow. We've just taken stock here, and between us we can lift a lot of stuff in the next few months and nobody be any wiser. And you've got to do it, you understand."

His voice was low and threatening now and she shrank from him as he put his face near hers. "If you don't I'll ruin you body and soul—I give you my word."

Sam's feet kicked against the boards in his excite-

ment and Gertie looked up sharply. Mr. Lycester laughed.

"You needn't be scared of mice. You've far more cause to be scared of me. I'm hanged if your face doesn't beat Daisy Knox's into fits, and I'm not sure that I don't love you after all. You needn't be jealous of a silly doll with a doll's brains. Bah! the little idiot made me sick many a time with her airs and graces and silly bits of poetry. You're worth a dozen of her, and if you'll only be decent and look at things in a right light I daresay I'll marry you in a while. For you know you *do* love me."

The light in the shop was growing dim and Sam could not see the terror that crept into Gertie's eyes and he could not know how tumultuously her heart was beating. Lycester had seized her hand again and was trying to wind his arm about her waist, but she resisted stoutly.

"Let me go!" she said angrily. "If you touch me I swear I'll shout out. Do you hear Jack ——!"

She raised her voice and at the sound of his name the man released her and pushed her angrily away. "You hell cat!" he hissed. "If you say that again I'll choke you!"

"Then leave me alone," she panted, "and let me tell you something. Ellen knows I've come to the shop. God forgive me for deceiving her, but I told her that some of you were working and there was something I'd forgotten, and she will come to meet me if I'm late."

"Oh," he sneered; "so you've taken your precautions and I must behave myself. You simple fool, to think that you can frighten me. Now tell me; does Ellen know who I am?"

"Indeed she doesn't," Gertie replied. "She thinks you left the country and daren't come back. How should she know you with your black hair and moustache? *She* has no uneasy days and nights as I have, and if she was to know that you were on my track again it would break her heart."

Mr. Lycester laughed again. "More tragedy!" he said. "But didn't I hear she was going to be married? Her husband will keep her heart from breaking or else patch it up again. Who's the happy man?"

"Sergeant Smith of the police," Gertie replied, sullenly; "and perhaps I ought to tell you that he's seen your photo."

"What!" There was a new note in Mr. Lycester's voice—a note of alarmed surprise. He put his hand roughly on her shoulder. "Which photo? What d'you mean?"

"The one with the fair hair and the beard. It was in an old album and I'd lost it; and he asked me who it was and said he seemed to know the face."

"Well, of all the damned idiots ——" began Mr. Lycester and then stopped. "How long ago is this?" he asked.

"It was last month."

"And has he ever said anything about it since?"

"No. I burned the photo the same evening."

Mr. Lycester began to pace the shop floor with his chin upon his breast. "This is the devil," he said at length; "and it comes of trusting a woman. Nobody else would be fool enough to keep the photo of a man who's 'wanted' in the family album. You bet they've got one just like it at the Town Hall, and you and I may find ourselves there one of these days just

because you're a born idiot. He'll worm it all out of your sister once they're married, but it's to be hoped he thinks I've left the country. But where'll you stand?"

"I sometimes think I'll tell him all about it. I should be glad to tell the truth and have done with it," she replied, wearily. "It's wearing me out. Life's nothing but hell to me."

"You'll do no such thing," he said fiercely. "Hang it all, Gertie, can't you see what a mess we're in if this fellow hasn't forgotten all about it? I dare say he has, but it's a beastly complication, and I've got to think it over. Your damned carelessness may ruin the whole business. It's no use stopping here any longer now, but don't you imagine I'm going to drop it. I shall want you again before long and you may as well make up your mind to be reasonable. If you don't I'll see you suffer for it."

Gertie said nothing and Mr. Lycester went to the back door and opened it. Evidently the way was clear, for he called her name and Sam heard him lock and bolt the door after her. Then he came back to the shop, and for some minutes was lost in thought. "Damn it and her," Sam heard him mutter.

Finally he took his hat and, climbing into the hoist, slid back the outer door and left the building, after which Sam ventured to draw up his legs and only then became conscious that they were cramped and painful.

Five minutes later he got down and replaced the dolls' houses in position.

"Jiminy!" he exclaimed more than once. Then he let himself out and walked very slowly to No. 7, Brick Row.

CHAPTER XXIII

SERGEANT SMITH ENTERS THE TEMPLE OF HYMEN.

CISSIE and Thomas were in bed and Maud Annie was yawning and turning her thoughts in the same direction when Sam arrived. Mrs. Tickle's eyes were heavy, too, but she knew that the boy would not have come at that late hour without a more serious purpose than that of merely explaining the delay. Moreover, sleepy as she was, she perceived that Sam was excited, and she therefore bade Maud Annie go upstairs and leave her to butter a slice of currant loaf for the lad's supper.

Sam assured them he couldn't eat "a bite," but Mrs. Tickle ignored the protest and raked the embers together in order to boil water for a cup of tea. Sam could scarcely wait until she sat down again before unburdening himself of his tale. All the way along he had been elaborating a plot which would have been greedily clutched at by the people who make "pictures." The consummation was to see Gertie exonerated and Blister in the strong grip of the law, as represented by Sergeant Smith. Sam had worked it all out admirably and had arranged the final scene for the stage he had just quitted. He was afraid his hiding-place would have to be abandoned, for he was sure Mr. Smith would never be able to compress his

bulk into the small dimensions of a dolls' house cupboard; and that was a pity, because, though the private office might answer the purpose just as well or even better, the effect would not be so dramatic.

Sam would have liked the bolt that was to descend from the policeman's blue to have had a bigger drop than three feet, and he did not doubt that the picture people would have been able to manage it. However, if the effect was not so thrilling the result would be the same, and knowing the sergeant as he did, Sam never doubted that the bolt would come down with considerable force; and he devoutly hoped that provision would be made for an auxiliary bolt of an unofficial character and of much smaller proportions; for it was natural that he should want to be on the spot, seeing that he was both stage manager and author of the play.

Mrs. Tickle, unfortunately, spoiled the daydream to Sam's great disappointment. Her eyes lost all trace of sleepiness as the narrative proceeded, and she listened with interest to all the boy had to say. Sam became more and more excited as he neared the climax, and Mrs. Tickle looked at him thoughtfully. She did not interrupt him even when he finished with narrative and began to sketch the proposed sequel.

"I have 'im tied up," Sam concluded, gleefully. "Talk about double-dyed 'uns, eh? and 'im with 'is 'air dyed black!" Sam forgot his newly-acquired aspirates in his excitement. "Jiminy! 'e'll look another picture next crop. It'll be pie to see 'im going down t' road wi' t' bracelets on."

Mrs. Tickle shook her head and Sam's jaw dropped.

"Don't go so fast, Sam," she said. "There's other folks besides Blister to be thought of, and more things nor bracelets."

Sam's spirits began to droop. Mrs. Tickle was a seer in whom he had absolute confidence, and it was evident that she had seen something that he had overlooked. He remained silent.

"What about Miss Daisy? They'll none be so pleased if it gets out 'at she's been sweet on a swindler. You wouldn't like to do 'er any 'urt. Then there's Ellen. Frank Smith 'll maybe fight shy o' wedding someb'dy 'at's been mixed up wi' a thing o' that sort. It bides a bit o' thinking about, this does."

Sam's face showed consternation now as well as disappointment. He looked at Mrs. Tickle with his mouth partly open, but had nothing to say. Mrs. Tickle was also silent for a few moments.

"It 'ud serve 'im right to 'ave 'is wings clipped, right enough," she said, "but if I was you I'd keep quiet about it for a day or two, and whatever you do, don't let Frank Smith 'ear on 't. When is it them two's going to be wed?"

"Next Wednesday," said Sam, without animation. He was nursing a grudge and was devoting all his attention to keeping the unwelcome burden warm.

"Well, leave it over while after then and we shall both 'ave 'ad time to think about it. When Frank stands o' t' same side o' t' gate as Ellen 'e'll look at things diff'rent. You see, Sam, Gertie isn't forced to get off. She was 'appen easy led and simple, but oft enough t' innycent 'as to suffer i'stead o' t' guilty. Now let's both sleep on 't, and don't you do naught rash."

Sam went home in chastened mood, carrying his grudge with him, but the bitterness was against real life with its irritating complications, and did not extend to Mrs. Tickle, who was not to be held respon-

sible for the conditions she was quick to see and to interpret.

Ellen censured him for keeping late hours. "You've never been working till this time, have you?" she asked. "Gertie came in ever so long since and said they'd made her stop to work. She looked ready to drop. Her head ached that badly you might have thought she'd been crying her eyes out, and she went off to bed without supper. What is there up at the shop?"

Sam, knowing he had nothing to fear in the way of contradiction, replied in a grumbling tone of voice that he hadn't left till long after Gertie, and that it was some rotten idea of Blister's that was responsible for headaches and late hours; and the reply satisfied Ellen who said she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer, and if he wanted any supper he must get it for himself.

Sam nodded, and sat with his head in his hands for a quarter-hour after she had gone trying to readjust his views. He chuckled to himself as he went upstairs.

"Bracelets or no bracelets," he muttered voicelessly, "I guess I can raise blisters on Mr. B. Lycester any time now. Jiminy! I wouldn't ha' missed this for two weeks' wages."

From that day Sam became a zealous disciple of Mr. Sherlock Holmes and abandoned elementary mechanics in favour of the more exciting occupation of tracking a criminal. It now became a regular part of his day's routine to return to the shop after locking up for the night in order to make sure that no further arrangements had been made for clandestine meetings. He was certain he would not have to wait long, for Mr.

Lycester had taken upon himself the responsibility of locking the back doors, as he had reason to believe (he said) that there had been cause for complaint in that connection. This Sam repudiated with emphasis, but the manager was not convinced and was determined to secure his own peace of mind as well as the shop premises by seeing to the matter himself. Sam counter-moved by having his hiding-place always accessible and empty.

He had to proceed cautiously, for Mr. Lycester's temper became more bearish every day, and even Mr. Knox was unaccountably irritable and inclined to be snappish.

Mr. Knox was suffering from reaction and an uncertain state of mind. The first result of the new understanding with Daisy had been the agreeable determination to kick Lycester out of the shop the very next day, but Daisy had strongly opposed this course, and on calm reflection her father had seen that she was right. Of course he would not keep the fellow permanently, but it would never do to have it assumed that Lycester, after having succumbed to his daughter's charms, had fallen a victim to her changed attitude. Mr. Knox knew that his manager would be able to play the martyr quite convincingly, and he didn't want Daisy to be talked about. Moreover, everybody knew that he had buttered his manager's praises very thickly and it would be prudent to scrape off the butter a little before taking drastic action.

That was his first mood. Later on his wrath abated, and if it had not been for the rebellious scowls of his workpeople and for the revelations that came through the slit in the curtain he might have overlooked what had occurred at "The Poplars" and wiped the

memory off his mental slate altogether, for all's well that ends well, and Lycester's place might not be easily filled. It meant harder work for him if his manager should leave. Business was still humming, and nobody could deny that it was Lycester's whip that had made the top spin to that pleasing tune. The price he was paying, however, was too heavy : sooner or later Lycester would have to go.

Daisy did not see this, nor did Lycester suspect it. That astute gentleman had taken the earliest opportunity of putting himself right with his master, and had sought a private interview and made a humble confession of his sins. It had been very cleverly done, and in such a way as to make Mr. Knox feel that the rejected lover had after all been roughly dealt with. Mr. Lycester did not say one unkind word about Daisy ; on the contrary, he saved all the hard words for himself ; but the impression left on Mr. Knox's mind was that if he had been in the manager's place he would have found it impossible to be so meek and charitable. Mr. Knox had been very red and uncomfortable during the interview, but the other had stood with bowed head and downcast eyes and had asked in a low and contrite voice to be allowed to show his penitence and fidelity by devoting his undivided attention in future to the interests of the business.

"All right," Mr. Knox had said, awkwardly. "We'll go back to where we started from," and Mr. Lycester had bowed and retired.

An hour later Mr. Knox wondered if he would not have done better to yield to his animal instincts and help the fellow out of the shop with his foot ; and this feeling remained uppermost in all his oscillating moods even though (and perhaps because) he saw that Mr.

Lycester was re-doubling his zeal and applying the whip more vigorously than ever.

Daisy's attitude also perplexed her father. Whereas he found it difficult to be cordial with his manager, she could enter the shop and talk to him quite affably. Poor Mr. Knox ran his hand through his hair and told himself that the ways of women were among the deep things of life, and later in the day hinted to Jonas that it was time he got a move on before Daisy should change her mind again. Jonas merely smiled. He was not so simple as the older man, and he knew that Daisy's careful courtesies were likely to make Mr. Lycester wriggle behind his mask of deferential politeness.

Every day Mr. Knox's eyes were fixed on Sam. The slit in the curtain had a positive fascination for him when that youth was in the shop. He saw that the lad's manner was often provocative, but what caused him most astonishment was his constant good-humour. Neither cuffs nor curses disturbed Sam's equanimity, and he did the meanest and most unpleasant tasks with a cheerfulness that his master almost resented. It was undeniable that Sam often deserved the rough treatment he received, for no self-respecting superior could be expected to overlook such grimaces as Sam indulged in, to say nothing of replies and asides that may have been witty but were certainly impertinent—all this was true enough, but the boy's willingness and high spirits seemed to his master to call for better treatment.

Practical jokes seemed to have ceased—at any rate Mr. Knox neither heard nor saw anything of them—but he was certain that Sam was watching Mr. Lycester, and these various circumstances combined to

make him uneasy and irritable without knowing why. Day by day the conviction deepened that he would never know real peace of mind as long as Lycester remained. But how to get rid of him decently?—that was the question. He didn't want a rival house to get him.

Sam and Gertie had holiday for Ellen's wedding, which passed off without mishap. A brief honeymoon in the country had been conceded by the sergeant, but it was to terminate on the Sunday evening. Sam accompanied Mr. Smith upstairs in the capacity of valet when the time came for the bridegroom to divest himself of the frock-coat that had been kindly lent for the occasion by a church-going gas-inspector of similar build.

"Well, that's over, thank goodness," ejaculated the sergeant with a sigh of relief as he removed and folded the borrowed coat," and all I wish is that it was next Monday morning."

"Don't get down-hearted," said Sam. "You can always take poison if t' worst comes to t' worst."

The sergeant frowned. "Never heard nothing more about that photo, have you?" he asked in a low tone.

"That photo's never been mentioned from that day to this," Sam replied, screwing up his lips and shaking his head. "You bet, sergeant, it's an old sweetheart what she's ashamed of, and it 'ud be cruel to her to tear her 'eart open, partic'lar when you're spoons yourself. I couldn't do it."

"You shut up shop and listen to me," the sergeant replied politely. "This is between you and me and that bedpost. That light-haired chap was badly wanted a couple o' years ago and he's badly wanted

yet only I fancy he's put the sea between him and his friends. I've said naught about it down yonder because I want to be clear i' my own mind about Gertie and Ellen, but if you'll give your solemn oath not to tell I'll share t' tale with you."

Sam, sitting on the bed, placed his right hand on his breast and recited a remarkable oath that had been in use among the companions of his early days :—

" Strike me blind and strike me dumb !
Send me quick to Kingdom Come !
If I ever give away
What you tell to me this day !"

It satisfied the sergeant, who had fortified his spirits and his coffee with more rum that morning than Ellen would have approved.

" Well," he said, standing before Sam in his shirt sleeves with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, " it was a sort of a long-firm swindle. John Watson his name was—or one of his names—and he pinched his boss's goods and sold 'em cheap from a house in the same town. His adverts was in papers hundreds of miles away and scores of folks sent for the stuff. Some got 'em and some didn't, and just in the nick o' time he cleared off. From what I can make out, he cooked for himself and didn't have no accomplices. Gertie worked at the same shop—that much I've found out—but she left before he did and naught against her character. In fact, the character of both her and Ellen was *AI*, or otherwise you wouldn't have seen me in shackles this day."

The sergeant interrupted his speech to inquire the

meaning of a deep groan from Sam. "It was that there word 'shackles,' " the lad explained as he carried his handkerchief to his eyes. "I'm tender-hearted, as I told you, and I couldn't help being sorry for you as a mate o' mine."

"Stow that rot," said Mr. Smith, "and listen to what I've got to say to you. You owe me something, and you can show your tender heart in a better way nor kidding to cry into a dirty handkercher. You can find out on the quiet what Gertie knows about this John Watson. Of course, it's likely enough he gave her t' photo when she worked there, but what did she want to turn so crusty over it for and to put it out o' sight so quick? It's little things o' that sort that we have to go by, and it's just possible that the lass knows where he is. It would be a feather i' my cap to lay him by his heels, but it would be just like a woman to try to hide him. They're t' curiosest animals in creation, is women, and you can't account for 'em—not for t' best of them."

Sam was swinging his legs vigorously and picking his teeth with a pencil. The expression on his face was that of rather bored indifference. As the sergeant made no progress with his toilet, but seemed to expect an answer before proceeding further, the boy looked up and shook his head.

"There isn't nothing doing in that line," he said. "I finish here to-day 'cos Gert thinks o' going into lodgings herself, and I'm 'aving my cards altered to No. 7, Brick Row. And anyway I'm not poking my finger into Gert's pie."

"You ungrateful young devil," said the sergeant, warmly. "I'm not wanting to do the lass any harm. You'd never have known Brick Row but for me, and

now you won't lift your little finger to help me. One good turn deserves another."

Sam was not at all perturbed. "And you'd never ha' known Ellen but for me," he replied. "How can I owe you aught when I've paid you back wi' a wife like her—a woman 'at's naught again her character except 'at she's married a bobby?"

Sergeant Smith withdrew a heavy hand from his pocket and boxed Sam's ear smartly. Then he picked up his waistcoat and scowled at himself in the mirror. Sam watched him without resentment.

"If I was you, sergeant," said the boy, taking up a strategic position between the officer and the door, "I wouldn't go nosing into trouble i' this way, 'cos now 'at you've gone and got married, troubles is sure to come as thick as flies over a muck heap, and you can't help yourself. Suppose I was to find out something 'at was against Gert, where'd you be then? You take my tip and drop John Watson, or happen Ellen 'll raise lumps on you. You ought to know better at your time o' life nor to tumble into hot water wi' your eyes open."

"Frank," came a voice from the foot of the stairs at that moment. "Aren't you nearly ready. The cab's been here five minutes;" and Mr. Smith, contenting himself with a black look and what sounded like a naughty word, went down and joined his wife.

CHAPTER XXIV

DR. FORSYTH'S LEAVE-TAKING.

DR. FORSYTH opened the door of No. 7 without knocking and sat down on the polished chair beside the dresser. He said not a word to Mrs. Tickle, who was in the act of setting the kettle on the fire, but rested his elbows on his knees and drew a deep breath. Most women would have asked what was the matter, but Mrs. Tickle, after one comprehending glance, turned to the cupboard and bringing out the bottle of ginger wine poured a liberal quantity into a small cup and bade the doctor drink it. He obeyed without a murmur and, after breathing heavily once or twice, sat upright in the chair and grunted.

"There's naught like your teetotal stuff for a drop o' good strong alcohol," he said. "If I did my duty to the State, woman, I should set the Excise on you."

"Tut tut," replied Mrs. Tickle, "'there's naught there to 'urt a child. It gets a bit 'eady maybe wi' keeping, but I wish t' Brickfields drank naught no stronger. But 'as it warmed your inside?"

"Aye that it has," he answered, "but I'll just sit a bit if you don't mind;" and in response to Mrs. Tickle's invitation he went over to the fire and sat down in the arm-chair.

Mrs. Tickle was more troubled than her voice and manner indicated. The doctor's face was grey and the perspiration stood in big beads on his forehead and she noticed that the hands that gripped the arms of the chair shook a little.

"You're doing too much at it," she remarked; "you didn't ought to walk when t' air's that 'ot you could almost bake on t' flagstones. I'm sure sin' dinner I've been fair of a swelter myself."

The doctor was recovering himself. "One thing I like about you, Sarah Tickle," he said, "is that you don't pester a man with all sorts of questions. Ninety-nine out of a hundred women would just have stood with their hand on my shoulder and asked me what was the matter and what they could do for me. I prayed the Lord to give me strength to get to No. 7 and a sensible woman."

"Well, I'm glad He answered your prayer," replied Mrs. Tickle, "for right enough there's lots o' menseless bodies 'at's 'ardly sense to lift t' lid when t' kettle's boiling; and I reckon naught myself o' standing about and asking 'ow t' 'orse fell i'stead o' getting it on its legs again. But now that you're 'ere I'll tell you 'at I think you'd do well to sup some o' your own medicine and take things a bit more easier. You've looked worse nor middling lately."

"Well, get on with your work," said the doctor. "I'm coming round now. What were you on with when I came in?"

"I was just going to boil t' water for wer teas. Cissie 'll be in before long and 'er and me generally gets ours over i' good time. P'rhaps you'll stop and 'ave a cup wi' us?"

"Let Cissie fetch Duncan when she comes. She'll

like to ride back with him, and it won't hurt her to delay her tea twenty minutes. So you think I'm looking badly, Mrs. Tickle?"

His hostess nodded. "And I aren't by myself," she said.

The doctor was silent for a few minutes, but his eyes were fixed on hers as if he was calculating the effect of his proposed announcement. "In three weeks' time by my reckoning I shall be off the map," he said deliberately.

Mrs. Tickle held her breath and an unaccustomed moisture filled her eyes. She did not profess to misunderstand him; she uttered no protest, made no inquiry. "Nay for sure!" she said in a tone that indicated the depth and sincerity of her sorrow.

"I'm glad you don't make a fuss," the doctor continued. "There's only one person knows besides you in this city and he's a medical man. I haven't known myself long and it came with a sort of a shock, Sarah, for if I'm a bit over-ripe I'd like to stick to the tree even in this filthy old Brickfields orchard; but I shall drop before the month's out, that's certain, and I could like to talk it over with somebody that won't splutter and do the water-cart business; so just sit you down a minute or two and be sensible.

There was a softness in the doctor's voice that was only present when evil tidings had to be announced or comfort administered, and Mrs. Tickle's motherliness came to her help and made it almost easy for her to gulp down her emotion and become her usual self. It was her belief that men of every age and temperament were but "childer" who needed "mothering," and she was quite prepared to play the part towards the old doctor who had been, as she

realised all at once, her best friend. What she did not know was that she had been one of his chief supports, but he told her.

"I didn't intend calling to-day," he said, "but that beastly attack drove me in, and it's just as well, because I might have put it off till I couldn't do it. You see, Sarah, I've got to say 'Thank-you' for all you've done for me or I shan't go with an easy mind."

"'Ark to 'im!" interrupted Mrs. Tickle; "and me 'at's never done naught 'at I know of."

"Hold your noise," said the doctor, "and don't tell humble lies. I've lied myself often enough, but I'm looking truth in the face now. Why, you've been doctor's assistant and district nurse and midwife and heaven knows what else, and what I should have done without you and what the Brickfields would have done without you won't bear thinking of."

"That ginger wine must ha' been stronger nor what I reckoned on," remarked Mrs. Tickle. "Now just lean back i' your chair while I brew some tea and you shall talk when you're more like yourself."

"Sit still, Sarah," said the doctor, "and save your gammon for those who've more time to spare than I have. You know it's true what I say."

He leaned back and half closed his eyes and a smile played about the corners of his lips. "You haven't forgotten Jack Webster, surely, and how you tried to hold his head whilst I drew that double tooth? Eh, woman, that pantomime has come back to me when I couldn't sleep o' nights and I've rocked the bed with laughing. I'll never forget how you boxed the giant's ears for the big babby you called him and held his head back by the hair, with his wee wife sitting on his feet."

The doctor laughed gleefully in the old way and Mrs. Tickle's face wreathed itself in a smile.

"And there was the time when Jess O'Reilly's twins came and the puir lassie hadna strength to pull round but went away with the daybreak—God rest her soul, as she would have said. Will I ever forget how you helped me to wrestle for her life, and how when she was gone you wrestled with that poor, broken-hearted wastrel of a Mick O'Reilly? Sarah Tickle, I'm ashamed of you for a liar when you say you've done naught, and as proud as Lucifer to have known a woman of your mettle. When they let me in to hear what I have to say for myself up yonder I'll boast about you, Sarah, though I'm thinking they'll know a deal more than I can tell them."

Cissie's entrance prevented Mrs. Tickle from replying, and the doctor changed his mind and drank a cup of tea with them before despatching the child to the surgery with the scribbled note. When she had gone he drew the chair up to the fire again.

"It's a funny thing, Sarah," he said ruminantly, "how fond I've been of all these folk. Now and again when I was new to the job I used to think I should never stick it, and it came over me sometimes that I was making a mess of my life, and I'm afraid Mrs. Forsyth used to think so, because you see I'd done pretty well at college and I had what they call a 'future.' But there was a fascination about the Brickfields that gripped me, and when the wife died I wedded myself to my work. I've never been what you call a religious man. I don't know how it is, but I never seemed to have time for churches and chapels, and I was never very comfortable with the sort of people that attend 'em. It wasn't their fault, of

course; I suppose the Brickfields atmosphere spoils one for that sort of air. But there was one text that always got in front of my eyes when I was inclined to growl a bit, where it says "the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost," and I remembered reading that some great man—John Wesley maybe—used to say that he went not just to those who needed him but to those who needed him most. And that seemed to fit my case, and I settled down to my work and got to love it. But if it hadn't been for you I believe there was a time when I should have given it up."

"Nay, doctor," ejaculated Mrs. Tickle.

"I believe I should. I was run down and overworked, and we'd an epidemic of murders and suicides—you've not forgotten—and it got on top of me. But you went wherever I did and never turned a hair; and when I said something about the rottenness of it you replied—'Them 'at works among t' sewage keeps t' town sweet.' I've never forgotten your exact words and the way you looked at me. Some folks would turn up their noses and put their scented handkerchiefs to them if they were to hear that, but it bucked me up and gave me my courage back; and I've never been fainthearted since. God bless you, Sarah Tickle."

He stretched out his hand and Mrs. Tickle took it, and they remained thus united for a few moments with no sound in the room but the loud song of the canary.

"It seems queer somehow," he continued at length," that I have to go myself after helping so many other folk down to the water's edge, but I'm an old man and there's naught to grumble about. But do you know, Sarah, I get to puzzling my brain about

what's going to happen to me on the other side. Not that I'm worrying or whining, you understand, but I'm curious. The things I learned as a bairn, bits o' paraphrases and answers out o' the Shorter Catechism, creep into my mind when I'm quiet, and I could fancy myself at my mother's knee. I'm not going to send for a parson to shrive me—I've seen that sort of thing done too often by cowards who daren't face the music, and I'm not afraid—but it'll be good to think that there's one who'll mention my name when she puts up her prayers, and I'll trust you for that, Sarah?"

"Don't you bother your head, doctor," replied Mrs. Tickle; "though I wouldn't like to say 'at a parson wouldn't be a 'elp to you, 'cos you'd understand what 'e meant where it's gibberish to me. I've always gone to church reg'lar and I should miss it now same as a meal, but there's times and times again when I get naught out o' t' sermon but crumbs. So I've always made it i' my way to read out o' t' Book for myself, and to me that's same as a slice off o' t' loaf, 'cos I know where to find t' plain food. And I could find you t' place where it says 'at there's lots 'll be fair capped 'at they aren't owned when they get to t' other end, and lots more 'at 'll be just as capped 'cos they're welcomed wi' both 'ands. And I'll tell you why you'll be among t' second lot—'cos it says 'Inasmuch as you did it unto one o' t' least o' these you did it unto Me.' I've always said and I always shall 'at you lose naught by doing a kindness and walking a straight road, and what you've done for t' Brickfields there isn't any book big enough to 'old but what's kept up above. I'll mention you when I say my prayers, no fear, but I'd be ashamed for the

Lord to think 'at I was afraid 'e'd 'appen put you into t' wrong place if I didn't jog 'is memory."

The doctor's face lit up. "Eh, Sarah," he said, "you're as good as a tonic. If I get into Doubting Castle when I'm laid on my back I'll just send for you, woman, to bring the key. And now, look you, we've talked long enough about myself, and there's more important things to think of. I shall have to find somebody to take up my practice, and there's no telling what callow popinjay will buy it and spring his new-fangled poisons on you. Give me a sheet of note-paper and I'll jot down a prescription or two for Cissie and you. They laugh at old Forsyth, but he knows what's good for Brickfields' insides anyhow."

When this had been done they sat and conversed together in a low tone of voice. It was an almost sacred time for both and what they said must not be repeated, but they took farewell of each other calmly, albeit with hearts that ached.

Soon afterwards Duncan drove up, with Cissie sitting in state in the middle of the back seat. The doctor kissed the child when he took his leave and shook hands warmly with Mrs. Tickle; and though he continued to visit the Brickfields for a while it was the last time he called at No. 7.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN WHICH CUPID GETS BUSY.

MISS DAISY KNOX was in an unenviable state of mind. For one thing she was lonely and her own company bored her. Her father was in bed suffering from biliousness of the body and atrabiliousness of the mind; the former caused by over-indulgence in puff pastry (according to Daisy) or by the beastly, muggy weather (according to himself); the latter due to a variety of circumstances that did no credit to the Government of the best of possible worlds.

Daisy could not imagine what had come over her father, for instead of requiring her to sit with him so that she would be at hand in case of an emergency (and, being a man, her father was always foreseeing emergencies when he was ill and preparing for the worst), he had told her, with something approaching brusqueness, that it fidgetted him to see her hanging about and she had better go downstairs and read poetry until he rang for her. Daisy went and wondered, but she did not read poetry, nor did she settle down to fancy-work, but stood in the window of the drawing-room and ruminated on the ways of men and the ups and downs of life, all of which she found passing strange.

There was nothing inspiring or consolatory in the

view, for a fine, warm drizzle was falling and everything and everybody looked uncomfortably damp so Daisy could abandon herself to meditations, and her thoughts obeyed her summons in such numbers that before long it would have been possible for her to collect them into a volume that might have been published under the attractive title of "Man: His Unreasonableness and Stupidity. With illustrations from life."

Mr. Knox was one of the illustrations, and occupying, as he did, such a close relation to Daisy, with all the advantages that contiguity offered, it was distinctly disappointing to realise that he was on the downward grade—that he was not the man he had been twelve months before. Then, Daisy could do as she liked with him: order him about like a big, affectionate mastiff: convince him that she was a twentieth century Portia and that he was very lucky to have such a Daniel beneath his roof to deliver judgments for him. Now, he had rebellious fits, during which he was irritable and masterful and disposed to intimate that there were not many girls who had such an easy-going father as she had. True, he was very fond of her, very indulgent and generous, but he was no longer content to enjoy the cushioned ease of an inside passenger but must needs climb up on to the box-seat and take the reins himself and sometimes crack the whip. It was rather disconcerting and tiresome.

It was Mr. Lycester's fault—Daisy was sure of that—and Mr. Lycester had certainly been very unreasonable. Daisy did not follow this train of thought quite as closely as the last because another was always trying to get in front of it, namely, that she had

nobody but herself to blame for this state of things; which was ridiculous. She gave an impatient little stamp with her foot whenever the thought crossed her mind and said, "Well, I don't care; he *was* unreasonable, and he was rude and horrid and vulgar, and I'm very sorry that I ever had anything to do with him—the brute!" and so dismissed him.

As for Jonas Peacock—and of course her thoughts travelled to him—he was the most stupid and unreasonable of the three, and Daisy was not only disappointed but vexed with him. It was beyond belief that he should remain just brotherly and lukewarm when he must know that Bert—no, Mr. Lycester—had been given his passports and bowed out of "The Poplars" for good. She had not told Jonas, of course, but no doubt her father had, and if he had been the man she had taken him to be, he would have realised that she was feeling lonely and have stepped into the breach and—and—

Instead of which he had been content to smoke his pipe with her father and had been just as nice to her as during the months of Mr. Lycester's interregnum, and not a bit nicer. He had not followed her into the drawing-room nor lingered with her in the hall, nor asked her to rejoin the choir, nor shown intelligent sympathy, nor done any single one of the things that a reasonable man would have been eager to do; and this was the unkindest cut of all.

Surely he could not have cooled as much as appearances indicated. That was unthinkable and would prove him to be stupid. Daisy did not like this thought but she forced herself to dwell on it, and the longer she dwelt on it the less certain she became of Jonas's stupidity and the more convinced of her own.

She put herself for the first time in Jonas's place and looked at the matter with his eyes, and a little chilly sense of uneasiness spread over her complacency.

It was quite characteristic of Daisy that when once she had determined to "bottom" a thing (to use her father's expression) she was not to be deterred by the possibility of unpleasant discoveries, and she went into the breakfast-room, where there was a low fire, and sat down with her chin in her hands to pursue her investigations; and the farther her thoughts led her the more uncomfortable and depressed she became. Here, in this mood and in this attitude Jonas found her twenty minutes later.

"Hallo! Daisy," he said. He had entered unannounced as usual, and she had not even heard him, as he shook his overcoat in the hall. "Isn't your father in?"

Daisy explained in an unusually subdued tone of voice, and Jonas, not at all disconcerted or undecided, drew the other deep chair alongside Daisy's and put a few small pieces of coal on the fire, with the easy freedom of an old friend.

"It's a beastly evening," he said, "and a fire's 'grateful, comforting.' So the pater's out of sorts and you're on your lonesome?"

The voice was cheery. He was filling his pipe as he spoke and was evidently preparing to stop. Daisy's spirits rose, though her pulse quickened perceptibly, and the pathetic mood receded a step. "I didn't invite you to stop, you know," she remarked.

"That's true, but you'd be jolly sorry if I didn't," he replied, coolly, "and I should be jolly sick if you didn't want me."

He was applying the match to the pipe as he spoke,

but he turned to look at her when it was drawing properly. Her chin was still in her hands and her eyes were on the fire. She had been prepared to bridle at the first assertion, but the second mollified her and tied her tongue.

"I'm sorry your father's bilious," Jonas went on, "but it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and it comes handy to have him out of the way, because we can have a nice long talk and come to an understanding—at any rate I hope it will be nice, and I think it will."

Poor Daisy! How tumultuously her heart was beating now. It had never acted so riotously for Bert. Where was her boasted self-possession, the equanimity that made her mistress of every situation? She did not dare to look at Jonas.

"You know what I'm going to tell you"—he took the pipe out of his mouth and laid it on the tiled hearth—"you've known it all the time you've been fooling with that band-box dandy of a Lycester, but I'm going to put it into plain words. You're the dearest girl in the world to me, Daisy, and you always will be. I haven't as much poetry on the tip of my tongue as that silly ass, but I've a jolly sight more in my heart. I've loved you ever since I knew you, and I love you now as I never loved you before, and I can make you happier than any other man that breathes if you'll come to me. And you will, won't you?"

He put an arm about her neck, but she did not remove her chin from her hands nor respond to the pressure. Only her bosom heaved alarmingly.

Jonas bent down and looked into her face, but she turned her head away, not, however, before he had

seen her eyes. He was a masterful man, and he put his two hands on her cheeks and forced her lips to his mouth. He was a rough wooer, and he kissed her again and again—he covered her face with kisses. Then she disengaged herself and spoke—calmly but in a low tone.

“Listen to me, Joe. I’ve been an awful fool, but I didn’t know just how big a fool until to-night.”

“Then that’s where I’d the advantage of you,” replied Jonas, “for I knew all along. But what difference does that make? I knew as well as I know my A B C that you’d come to yourself after a while, and I think no worse of you for a bit of a flirtation. But if I’d thought you were genuinely smitten and were going to marry that bounder, I’d have carried you off under his very nose—make no mistake about that. I wouldn’t have let him ruin your life for you. I was never afraid of him—not I. He’s the sort girls get fond of till they find them out; but he’s like the stuff your father’s been eating—he turns the stomach when you’ve had a lot of him.”

“I can’t forgive myself,” Daisy said. “I’ve been so awfully mean and horrid, and I really did think I should like to marry him, Joe, at one time because he was so fond of poetry and art and things of that kind; and you don’t care for them one bit.”

“Oh you goose,” said Jonas, putting his arm round her neck again and drawing her head on to his shoulder; “I oughtn’t to call you a goose, but I shall do because Lycester stuffed you so beautifully;—he knows no more about poetry than a parrot; and as for art—well, he’s just full of it: artful—but it’s been the art of bamboozling you into being his wife. Lycester an artist! It’s all sleight-of-hand, my

darling. He's a quick-change artist, that's what he is. Let's drop him. He isn't worth wasting another moment on, because moments are precious, and I shall have to spare five minutes before turning out time to go upstairs and get your father's blessing. Now tell me, Do you love me with all your heart, and are you going to be Mrs. Jonas Peacock?"

"But, Joe, it is really a horrid name, you know?" said Daisy some minutes afterwards. "I like you awfully—I believe I always have done, though you are so very masterful—but I do wish you'd been born with another name."

"I'll make it a name to be proud of," said Jonas, confidently; "and you'll help me, Daisy."

"Well, there are worse of course," said Daisy, whose mind was going back a few weeks. "I'd rather be called Peacock than Tickle."

A somewhat similar scene was being staged, strangely enough, in the Brickfields, and at the same hour, but they do things rather differently there.

Sam had taken Cissie and Thomas to the Pictures, and Maud Annie was sitting with her mother, helping her with the week's mending. She was restless and inattentive, and Mrs. Tickle looked at her curiously from time to time.

"'Ave you got t' jumps?" she inquired, as Maud Annie started and dropped her needle at a passing footstep. "You seem all of a flutter. What ails you, lass?"

"There isn't anything ails me," Maud Annie replied. "I thought there was somebody at t' door."

"Well, if there 'ad been," said her mother, "I'd ha' seen 'at 'e didn't nip off wi' you. You might

'ave something on your conscience by t' way you jump. You 'aven't been pinching aught, 'ave you? If you thought a bobby was after you, you couldn't carry on worse."

Maud Annie tossed her head and made no reply, and Mrs. Tickle returned to her darning. A few minutes later a hesitating knock was heard on the outer door, and Mrs. Tickle pushed back her chair, but Maud Annie rose hurriedly and dropped Thomas's shirt on to the table. "I'll go," she said.

She opened the inner door and said: "Come in, Arthur;" and a young man, carefully dressed, who carried a light cane and a red face, and who was obviously ill at ease, entered the room and advanced a few steps towards Mrs. Tickle.

"This is my friend, mother, Arthur Barber," said Maud Annie, who, now that the crisis had come, had regained her self-possession.

Mrs. Tickle rose and put her hands on her hips. "So that's what's made you same as a jack-in-a-box all t' evening," she remarked. "If I'd ha' been you I'd ha' spluttered it out 'at 'e was coming, and sat easy. But you're welcome, lad; take that other chair and we'll 'ave a bit of a talk."

The young man was shy, but Mrs. Tickle helped him, and they were soon on a friendly footing.

"You don't live in t' Brickfields, I reckon?" she asked, and he replied that his home was at the other end of the city.

"Of course I know naught about you," said Mrs. Tickle, "for Maud Annie's kept as mum as if it was something to be 'shamed on, but, as my friend Frank Smith says, what's in t' police force, folks is reckoned innyncent till they're found guilty, and I should say by

t' look of your face 'at there's naught much wrong wi' you. Still you can't always go by looks, and we can't ring you on t' counter same as coins to find out whether you're good or bad, so I shall want to know a bit more about you before I say either one thing or t' other. Maud Annie's a good lass, and I 'ope she'll change for t' better when she does change, and get a good 'usband."

Mr. Barber was silent for a moment or two, and then managed to remark that he would be able to procure testimonials which he hoped would satisfy Mrs. Tickle. That lady nodded.

"That'll do for me," she said. "I don't expect you'll be an angel, and Maud Annie's wings 'asn't begun to grow yet, I give you my word, choose what you may think. But if you'll be good to 'er and take 'er out o' t' Brickfields, and let 'er put d'oyleys on t' plates and a bit o' crochet-work on t' sham towels in t' bedroom you'll take a toathri years off 'er face and make 'er as 'appy as t' canary."

"For shame! mother," said Maud Annie, whose sallow face had flushed crimson.

"I've naught to shame for," replied her mother. "Arthur, if that's 'is name, might as well know first as last what you 'anker after, and I'm not making game of you nor saying aught 'at you need colour up for. I shall be sorry to lose you, my lass, when t' time comes for you to go, but I shall be glad for you to get into a neighb'rhood 'at suits you better, 'cos it's been as plain as t' poker end this many a long day 'at you'd never settle 'ere."

Sam was hilarious when he brought the others in. He had been a party to the plot, and laughed at the happy consummation. He and Mrs. Tickle sat over

the fire and discussed the situation when the others were in bed.

"Cissie 'll stop wi' me," said Mrs. Tickle. "She's always been same as she took after me, where Maud Annie 'as a lot of 'er Aunt Polly in 'er. I can't expect Thomas to stop. As like as not 'e'll get another job and move off, and anyway lads marries early now-a-days. But Cissie 'll be wi' me, God willing, for many a year to come, and I'm thankful 'at she seems to be picking up a bit."

"And there'll always be me," said Sam stoutly.

"Nay, I don't know," returned Mrs. Tickle. "You'll be same as Thomas, only more so. Any day might see you off."

Sam shook his head. "I'm a fixture," he said, "same as t' oven." It never occurred to him that he was Mrs. Tickle's guest on sufferance. "Mr. Knox is good enough for my money, and him and me hits it Ar. I'll make myself worth money to him before I've done; and then when she's old enough I could like to marry Cissie and live on here with you and help you to keep an eye on t' Brickfields. I'm all right here. It's heaven to where I came from. Don't you worry, mother, about me. I said I'd adopt you, long since, and I aren't going back on it."

Mrs. Tickle's eyes opened with astonishment. Then she laughed, but there was a slight tremor in her voice as she said: "Bless the boy; whatever will he say next? Go to bed, Sam!"

She did not follow him very soon, but sat with the big Book on her knee and her eyes fixed on its pages. She was not reading all the time, however. Her thoughts had gone back to the night of Shrove Tuesday eighteen months before when Sam had made his

appearance. At last she closed the book and turned off the light. "You never lose naught by doing a kindness," she said.

CHAPTER XXVI

SERGEANT SMITH LOSES HIS TEMPER.

SAM MUNDAY was in his most provocative mood. He sat on the arm of a chair in an office at the Town Hall, where Mr. Smith had conducted him because it happened to be unoccupied, and the sergeant stood with his back to the empty grate and wiped his brow with a green-and-red handkerchief.

"It's damned heavy to-day," remarked the officer.

Sam's eyes twinkled. "Here, I say, you didn't ought to use language o' that sort in front o' young fellows," he said, reproachfully, "and more particular when you're i' uniform. There's a law against it, and if t' beak was to get to know you'd be losing your stripes."

The sergeant's face showed displeasure. "Just you shut your shop up," he replied, crossly, but in a subdued tone of voice. "You've as much lip as 'ud serve a dozen, and I'm not having any more of it. You've never done with your impudence since I got wed. Next time I'll land you one on t' side o' t' head."

"Not for asking you to drop swearing, you won't," said Sam, meekly. "It 'ud be assault and battery, would that; besides, Ellen was always very particular

about cuss words, and now 'at you've been married eight weeks I should ha' thought you'd ha' finished with 'em."

The sergeant glared at him, but kept his hands behind his back.

"It was Ellen I wanted to speak about," he said sternly.

Sam thrust his hands deeper into his trousers pockets and shook his head.

"If you've been falling out," he said, "it's no use asking me to interfere. She'll take no notice of me—never did. You'd better get old Whiskers from t' chapel ——"

"I'll lift you out o' t' office with my foot in another minute," said the sergeant, now thoroughly exasperated. "Who the devil said we were across? and as for anybody from t' chapel, whiskers or no whiskers, I'll see 'em frizzle before I'll have 'em interfering."

"Jiminy!" ejaculated Sam. "This is 'orrible. Poor Ellen!"

He was just too late to ward off the blow that came with right good will from the officer's palm, but the pain on his ear was nothing to the joy in his breast. "That's what comes o' being kind-hearted," he murmured, as he picked himself up.

"Well, learn to behave yourself, then," said the offended officer. "You'd provoke a saint, you would."

"Not if I knew it, I wouldn't," said Sam, "but if he was to go and disguise himself as a p'liceman it 'ud be his own fault. You couldn't expect me to know."

Mr. Smith allowed himself to smile. Sam's good humour was infectious, and though the lad was a mis-

chievous young monkey, he occupied a warm corner in the officer's somewhat shrivelled heart.

"I can't stop here all day listening to your gammon," he said. "I asked you to call in because I wanted to tell you that I'm a bit forrader with that business you and I know about. But I'm in a fix, and it bothers me. You've made naught out of Gertie, I suppose?"

"Not me," replied Sam. "I've hardly seen her since I went to No. 7."

"Well," said the sergeant, "it's all a mare's nest so far as she's concerned. By what Ellen says, the fellow was a bit sweet on the lass when they were down Bristol way, but she didn't fancy the chap, and in fact they came up here to get out of his road. It seems she'd sought that photo high and low and couldn't find it, because when the chap turned out a wrong 'un she didn't want anybody to know that she'd ever had aught to do with him, and that was what made her mad when I spotted it."

Sam was genuinely interested, and he nodded to the sergeant to continue.

"I should have dropped it then because Ellen says she always heard that he skipped it to South America, which fits in with the information we have, but two or three days since I learned—or at any rate I've had reason to suppose—that he never did naught o' t' sort, and"—the sergeant lowered his voice—"I may say it's suspected that he's in this city."

Sam's heart began to beat more quickly, but he merely whistled and assumed a look of pleasurable excitement. Then a thought struck him.

"And you think Ellen and Gert's in at it?" he asked eagerly.

"I think naught o' t' sort, you silly fool," said the sergeant, angrily, "and you don't want to shout their names out in that way. What I'm doing I'm doing on my own, as I've told you before, and I'm telling you this in confidence because I want you to help me. I'm sure Ellen isn't lying: she's too plaguey religious—— What do you mean by shaking your head in that way?"

Sam withdrew his hands hastily from his pockets, for Mr. Smith's tone was again threatening. He felt, however, that he must keep the sergeant's thoughts occupied until he himself had turned over the new development in his mind. "Religion's happen all a blind," he suggested. "You never can tell. It 'ud be a sad job if you turned out to ha' married into t' family."

"Into what family?" the sergeant inquired aghast.

"*His*," replied Sam imperturbably. "Suppose he turns out to be their brother? T' minute I set eyes on t' photo I seemed to know t' fellow, and when you come to study"—Sam lowered his voice to a mysterious whisper, and cast an uneasy look towards the door—"he has a look of Ellen, don't you think? That tale about being sweet on Gert's all kid, maybe, and it 'ud be only natural, religion or no religion, to hide him out o' t' way if he belongs to 'em. But it 'ud be rotten hard luck for you when you've only just got wed to have it brought up against you 'at you'd married into that lot."

The sergeant drew out his handkerchief again and passed it over his forehead. "I don't see no likeness to Ellen," he said uneasily, and the look of anxiety deepened in his eyes. "I believe you know more about this than you're willing to tell, Sam."

Sam shook his head. "I've never dared breathe his name to 'em; Gert 'ud ha' snapped my head off if I had done, but if he ever came near t' house when I was there I didn't see him. All t' same Ellen used to seem sort o' nervous at night-time, same as if she thought somebody might be turning up. Does she get you to look under t' bed?"

"No, she doesn't," said the sergeant, shortly.

"She always did me," said Sam, significantly. "She'd hardly go upstairs after dark unless Gert or me had looked under t' beds. She happen thought their John 'ud be coming there to hide."

The sergeant's face was black. Some unwelcome inward voice persisted in an attempt to persuade him that the resemblance Sam had spoken of did really exist. He looked keenly at the boy, however, and was not wholly deceived by his air of childish innocence.

"You're trying to stuff me, you young fool," he growled. "I'll take my oath Ellen knows naught no more than she's told me, but Gertie's up another street; she's like you—as close as t' meat to t' bones, and I wouldn't like to say that she doesn't know more than she's willing to part with. Now this isn't a matter to kid about. In my position I can't say naught to her—you've gumption to see that for yourself—so I'm saying it to you as a friend of hers. I'd like to know where she stands. If he is one o' t' family—and that's a new idea, and I don't believe there's aught in it—I shall have to go careful or I shall be in the devil of a mess; but I'm a police officer, and duty 's duty."

The sergeant's lips closed firmly on the aphorism, and his eyes fixed Sam's.

"What you want me to do?" inquired the lad, soberly.

"I want you to tell Gertie that I'm after that chap she had the photo of," replied the sergeant slowly and with emphasis; "and to let her know that somebody else 'll be on his track before long if I'm not. Tell her you think you've seen him about the town, and see how she takes it. Tell her—tell her"—the sergeant's head approached very near to Sam's—"if she knows aught, she'd better share it with you. I don't want her to say aught to me or to Ellen either, but you can tell her that you'll try to give her a hand if she's mixed up with it anyway—I mean with t' idea of screening him. Then you can tell me on the quiet. And remember, my lad, mum's the word."

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. LYCESTER MAKES A HURRIED EXIT.

MUM may have been the word, but Sam was bursting to unseal his lips before the opportunity was afforded. Mr. Long came in to supper and dropped asleep over his pipe in the chimney corner, and Mrs. Tickle had not the heart to wake him.

"Put t' cloth over t' canary, Maud Annie," she said, "and get you off to bed. Poor fellow," she continued in a lower tone of voice, "I doubt if 'e'll carry t' sandwidge boards much longer. They must a'most touch now when 'e's between 'em."

Sam suggested that it would be a kindness to the old man to rouse him and help him across to the lodging-house, but Mrs. Tickle would not hear of it.

"E's warm where 'e is," she said, "and it'll none bank us to burn t' gas for another 'alf-hour."

When at length he awoke and shambled off, Sam turned to Mrs. Tickle and told her all the sergeant had said. "What 'ud you do if you were me?" he asked.

Mrs. Tickle did not hesitate. "I should do what you ought to ha' done long sin'. You've got to tell Mr. Knox all about it now, Sam. It isn't a case o' play-acting."

The good woman's tone was firm, and she closed her

mouth with the well-known snap, and Sam became penitent.

"I know I ought," he said, "but t' longer I put it off and t' less I like it. However, it's half-day closing to-morrow, and I'll slip up in t' afternoon and make a clean breast of it."

"You'd better," said Mrs. Tickle. "Mark my word's Frank Smith suspicions something, and it'll 'appen be best to tell 'im all t' tale. But first you've got to 'ear what Mr. Knox says. It's 'is business, and 'e ought to ha' been in t' secret long sin'."

Circumstances brought Sam's good resolution to a premature birth. Mr. Knox had barely sat down to lunch the next day when he was informed that Sam Munday wanted a word with him at the telephone. Surprise was writ large on his features as he pushed back his chair and obeyed the summons, but the writing was much larger when he returned to the dining-room five minutes later.

"Go on with your lunch," he said to Daisy. "I've got to go back to the shop at once."

"But you must have something to eat," said Daisy. "You've not been in very long. What's the hurry?" Mr. Knox was in the hall by this time. "I don't know," he said, with his hand on the knob. "I'll tell you when I come back. There's something up, apparently, and I must get off."

Daisy shrugged her shoulders and returned to her meal.

Sam was waiting in a state of suppressed excitement. He let Mr. Knox in at the front door, leaving the key in the lock in his excitement, and then continued the narrative that he had begun over the telephone. He did not make very rapid progress, for

he was too flustered to be quite coherent, and the tale was not half told when a noise was heard at the sliding door. Without another word the lad climbed up silently into his hiding-place and his master closed and latched the door of his office and placed himself where he could not be seen. The ventilators were open, and he would be able to hear everything.

Mr. Lycester seemed in good spirits. He sprang down from the hoist and entered the shop, whistling softly. Sam, with his eye to the crack in the boards, suddenly experienced a shock that sent his heart into his mouth. He had just realised that he had not removed the key—a circumstance that was bound to give the show away if Mr. Lycester should notice it, for Sam always let himself out by the front door.

Mr. Lycester was, however, unsuspecting on this occasion, and he took a cigarette from his case and lit it. He was apparently before his time, for, after consulting his watch, he drew a paper from his pocket and read for a while. Then he clasped his hands round his knees and gave himself up to amused contemplation. It was evident that some thought tickled him, for he chuckled to himself once or twice and shook his head as if he were rehearsing a scene.

After a time he looked at his watch more frequently and yawned. Then his gaze wandered round the shop and rested on Sam's hiding-place. For twenty hour-long seconds Sam thought he was discovered and froze with apprehension, but apparently Mr. Lycester's mind was easy. By and by he got down from the counter and, having stretched himself, walked up to the door of the office and tried it, carelessly. Mr. Knox hastily bobbed down, but the precaution was hardly necessary, because Mr. Lycester never noticed

the space between the curtains, and was manifestly only killing time, for after yawning again audibly and impatiently, he returned to the counter.

Mr. Knox crept to the high desk and opened one of the lower drawers with the caution of a burglar. After removing some of the contents he found what he sought—a short riding-whip with a thick stock; and he crept back and laid it on the chair.

Soon three taps were heard on the back door, and Mr. Lycester strode out of the shop and admitted Gertie. Mr. Knox stood erect now and held the curtain so that he could see without risk of discovery.

“Well, my sweet Gertie,” said Mr. Lycester, as the young woman leaned against the show-case behind the counter: “you’ve kept me waiting the deuce of a time, but we’ll let that pass. You haven’t got the roses back to your cheeks yet, but they’ll come before long. We shall see the sparkle in your eyes that we used to admire in the old days, and hear you laugh as you can do if you like. Why I don’t believe I’ve heard you laugh since I came to this rotten Emporium.”

There were no signs of laughter in the girl’s set face and weary eyes. They were frightened eyes, too, and her breath was coming in short gasps.

“I’ve come because you promised on your honour that you wouldn’t lay hands on me again,” she said, sullenly. “Say what you have to say, once for all, and let me get away. I’m afraid of you, and I don’t know why you can’t leave me alone. I’ve told you I won’t have anything to do with you—why can’t you take No for an answer?”

“How pretty you look when you get into your tantrums,” he said, teasingly. “The lovely Daisy

would give her eyes and her false hair to be half as beautiful as my Gertie. I ——”

The girl stamped her foot impatiently. “I want none of this nonsense,” she replied. “I’m not your Gertie and I never will be—I’ll go to gaol first. Say what you have to say, I tell you, and let me go.”

“All in good time, Miss Spitfire,” he said. “The afternoon’s young, and our little business needn’t take us very long. There’s time for love-making in between, and I’m feeling very tender and lover-like to-day. But business first and pleasure afterwards is a good rule after all, and I’ll not keep you waiting. What a good thing it is your sister’s married and you have the house to yourself in a way. Somebody said you were going into lodgings. I hope that isn’t so because you see we can make your house our headquarters for a time.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” she said hotly. “How often am I to tell you that I’ll have nothing to do with you; not if you kill me?”

“I’ve no intention of killing you,” he replied, with provoking sweetness; “oh, dear me, no. That wouldn’t help matters at all. There are much pleasanter ways of making you my hand-maiden. That’s a nice word, isn’t it? Has a sort of Scriptural flavour with it that ought to be pleasing to your ears—much nicer than saying ‘my tool.’ Now be reasonable, sweetheart, and don’t force me to be harsh. You’ll have to do my will in the end, so you might as well first as last.”

She drew herself more erect. He was sitting on the counter still, with his hands clasping his knees, and upon his face a smile of assurance and triumph. She was very white, but she looked steadily into his eyes.

"I've told you over and over again that I won't do what you ask," she said, "and I won't."

"But you will," he said; and the bantering tone was exchanged for one that was harsh and determined. "You'll do whatever I tell you. I'll make you so that you'll be glad to do my bidding—so that you'll ask to be allowed to do it—so that you'll cry your pretty eyes out if I cast you off. Unless you were prepared to give way you were a fool to come here, and I won't believe you. Now come, Gertie"—his voice softened again—"we've had enough of this foolery. We're old sweethearts. You haven't forgotten."

"No," said the girl—and she held the ledge of the showcase with her hands behind her and could not steady herself from trembling visibly; "I shall never forget. But I'm not your sweetheart now. I hate you and I won't do your bidding. You promised faithfully you wouldn't touch me if I'd give you this one interview, and if you lay a finger on me I'll scream, and God will send somebody to my help."

"Then He'll have to send them through the roof or the window," sneered the man, "and one short scream won't be heard far. You won't scream a second time. I'll give you one more chance. Do you think, you silly little fool, that I care what I promised you? All's fair in love and war. Are you going to do what I ask you or are you not?"

Mr. Knox tip-toed to the door, picking up the riding-whip on the way, and quietly pressed back the latch and put in the plug.

"I am not," said the girl; and before she could say another word Lycester's hand was over her mouth and his arm about her waist.

"We'll see!" he said. "When you've struggled till you're tired I'll carry you where screams won't be ——"

The sentence was not finished, for, with drawn-in breath, Mr. Knox opened the door of his office and in three strides was upon him. Before the man knew what was happening he felt a strong hand upon his collar and the thong of a heavy whip lashing his legs.

He had released Gertie at the first sound, but he was stunned by the suddenness of the encounter and helpless in his employer's grip.

"You dirty hound!" said Mr. Knox, as he continued to use the whip with all his strength; "I'll raise wheals on every inch of your body, you beastly, filthy cur."

It was nothing to Mr. Knox's discredit that he had not understood the whole of his manager's meaning, and had regarded him as a dissolute scoundrel who had inveigled Gertie to the shop with criminal intentions towards herself alone. Sam's explanation had not proceeded far enough to enlighten him fully.

Lycester, smarting and enraged, at length wriggled himself free. He was too cowardly to attack the older man with any more formidable weapon than his tongue.

"You shall pay for this," he panted. "I'll murder you, Knox, if I get a chance. And you, too, you she-devil. I see through your little scheme and your blessed cant about God."

Gertie was silent. She was pressing both hands to her heart and on the point of fainting. Sam, in his hiding-place, was too excited to descend, but he pushed back the door and looked down openly. Nobody noticed him.

"Murder me, will you, you dirty swine!"—Mr. Knox gasped out the words, but he still held the whip threateningly. "Wait till I've got my breath and I'll give you another dose. It's me that'll do the murdering. Thank heaven I knew you were coming, though this poor girl didn't tell me."

Mr. Lycester had nimble wits, and he now summoned them to his aid. It was impossible, he thought, unless Gertie had confided in her employer (which was not likely) that Mr. Knox should be acquainted with all the circumstances, and he deliberately sacrificed his character in order to obtain a temporary advantage.

"Oh, I daresay," he sneered, "and I suppose you know that the police are after her—that she's wanted for stealing goods, and that I was bargaining with her to keep her secret."

There was a scream from Gertie, who fell to the floor in a faint, a contingency the astute Lycester had reckoned on. He had not foreseen, however, what immediately followed when Sam came tumbling down from the cupboard.

"He's a liar, sir," said that youth, walking up to the manager and looking him defiantly in the eyes. "Gertie's no more wanted than you are, sir, but there's a warrant lying at t' Town Hall for John Watson, and if you'll let me step to t' telephone and ring up Sergeant Smith, he'll be up as quick as a taxi 'll bring him."

Lycester made a movement towards the back door, but Sam forestalled him and put the key in his pocket.

Then he turned to the discomfited man, whose teeth were clenched and in whose eyes was the glitter of malignant despair.

"I was up in that cupboard and heard every word you said to Gert last time you was here, and all she said, too; and I heard you say 'at she wasn't to blame but you had her tied up. And I know what Mr. Knox doesn't know, 'at you was trying to force her to play t' same trick here. I hadn't time to tell you, sir, before he came, but that was t' meaning of it."

Mr. Knox's hand tightened on the whip, and Lycester made a dash for the front door. He must have caught sight of the key, for it was the work of a moment to turn it, and before the others had realised what was happening, he was running at top speed down the road.

Sam looked at his master. "Let him go," said Mr. Knox; and Sam nodded, intelligently.

A dose of brandy soon brought Gertie round, and the next half-hour was occupied with confessions and explanations, after which Sam took the girl to No. 7, and told Mrs. Tickle what had happened.

Mr. Knox was tired, but he walked home with a light step. "I didn't do so bad for fifty-four," he said to himself; "and to-morrow we'll start the machinery afresh. I've said all along that Sam would make his way, and it won't be my fault if he doesn't. But, by Jove! what'll Daisy think?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN WHICH WE TAKE LEAVE OF THE BRICKFIELDS.

MRS. TICKLE stood at the door of No. 7 and conducted a desultory conversation with Louisa and her mother, who were standing in their doorway opposite. Sooty Bill, with his dirty pipe in his mouth, and his hands behind his head, leaned against the wall of his house and introduced an observation when the discussion took a turn that called for authoritative (and therefore masculine) judgment. None of the women took much notice of him, but he went on with his comments just the same, and found his reward in his wit. He had a habit of coming out in fine weather, when conversation was afoot and "putting in his fillings," to use Louisa's phrase, but these were like footnotes to the text, to be heeded or disregarded at will.

The afternoon was warm and the Brickfields was hot. Children, mostly of tender years but tough skins, sat in various kinds of undress upon the broad stone paving, and played with dirt. They were as unclean as they well could be, and fastidious people would not have bestowed more than a passing glance on them, but Mrs. Tickle was large-hearted enough to care for every chick, and dirt and disorder were never able to hide the angel in them from her eyes. She had been "somewhere about" when most of them came into the world, so that they were all her babies in a way.

"If they knew what was waitin' for 'em," said Louisa, after an interval of silence, during which Mrs. Tickle had stepped up to an infant who had rolled over and lain helpless, and had set it on as broad and firm a basis as possible, "they'd none sit as easy as they do. It's God 'elp them 'at's born i' t' Brickfields. It isn't their fault 'at they land 'ere, but they've got to suffer for 't all their lives. I'm allus sorry when I 'ear 'at another's come."

"You shouldn't listen," commented Sooty. "You want to mind your own business."

"That's one way o' looking at it," remarked Mrs. Tickle to Louisa. "'God 'elp 'em,' you say, and I daresay 'E does 'is best, but it's us on t' spot 'at ought to 'elp 'em, too. They're same as bulbs, is childer, they'll blossom into something decent even out o' t' muck if only folks 'll give 'em a 'elping 'and."

"Turn into daffys," said Louisa, with a short laugh.

"Red toolips," suggested Sooty. "They 'ave them to start wi'."

"You've no 'casion to make game," said Mrs. Tickle, calmly. "I never see 'em, bless their little 'earts, but I says to myself, 'You never know what's wrapped up i' that dirty bundle.' All you can think of, a'most, came out of a baby—t' Bible and 'ospitals and 'lectric trams ——"

"An' gin-shops," interposed Sooty.

"Aye, gin-shops and chimney-sweeps is on t' other side o' t' page," continued Mrs. Tickle, "and that's a pity, but there's no denying 'at poison comes out o' muck, same as pansies. But wi' childer it depends a good deal, as I say, on what sort of a 'elping 'and

they get, and for aught we know some o' them 'at's rolling in t' road 'll stand before princes one o' these days, for I could find you where it tells of a poor man 'at delivered a city when all t' others was at their wits' end. 'God 'elp 'em,' you say; but you want to start and 'elp 'em yourself, Louisa. It's as I say, you never lose naught by doing a kindness, and you never know where it'll end."

"I've 'eard you say it 'underds o' times," admitted Louisa's mother, "but I've never seen 'at you've gotten aught much by it."

"'Appen not," rejoined Mrs. Tickle, "and if you was to sprinkle scent on your 'andkercher you couldn't see t' smell, but it 'ud be there."

"Same wi' onions," remarked Sooty.

"But there's things you can see if you open your eyes," continued Mrs. Tickle, more warmly. "Look at Sam Munday. There's a lad 'at came out o' t' gutter, as you may say, and I do 'im a bit of a kindness 'at cost me naught, and 'e's paid me back many a 'underd times over. Same wi' Mr. Knox what gave 'im a job at t' Emporium—why, you ought to 'ear what 'e thinks o' the lad. 'E's lost naught by doing a kindness, I can tell you, and now you couldn't bribe 'im to part wi' t' lad. Right enough, they're not all 'is sort ——"

"You can't expect trumps every time," remarked Sooty.

"But you've to sow beside all waters," continued Mrs. Tickle, "and then leave it; and if there's naught else comes o' doing a kindness, it warms your inside for you."

"An' that 'ud be what I should call a rum feelin'," said the sweep.

"There's quality comin' down t' Row," Louisa remarked, and four pairs of eyes were focussed upon the approaching figures of a lady and gentleman.

"I'll bet any body a pint they're for No. 7," said Sooty, making the offer in a general way, and meeting with no acceptor.

As they drew nearer, Mrs. Tickle recognised Miss Daisy Knox, and retired indoors to remove her apron. She welcomed her visitors heartily a moment or two later, and closed the inner door.

"This is Dr. Peacock," Daisy explained. "I told him how awfully sweet you were to me, and he said he'd like to see you. So I've brought him."

The situation was quite clear to Mrs. Tickle, and she shook Jonas's outstretched hand warmly.

"And you've done right," she said; "and I'm as pleased to see you as if I'd come into a fortune. But as to me being sweet to you, Miss Daisy, I was sweeter to 'im, if you ask me."

"Yes, but don't you see," Daisy replied, "that that was the very best way of being sweet to me?"

Jonas laughed. "Well, anyhow, I'm very much obliged to you, Mrs. Tickle—in fact, we both are; and we've come to tell you so and to let you see that I'm really not half as bad as my name."

They had sat down at Mrs. Tickle's request, but she herself stood, with one hand on the table, and looked into the young man's eyes.

"I took a fancy to you," she said, "from what Sam's said, 'cos 'e's never tired o' cracking you up, and now 'at I've 'ad a good look at you, I'll tell Miss Daisy to your face 'at she's among t' lucky uns. Of course, I knew she was going to 'ave you before she'd been talking five minutes when she came to see me—

why, bless you, it didn't take 'alf an eye to see which way t' wind was blowing—but she just wanted someb'dy like to 'elp 'er over t' stile and tell 'er she was on t' right road."

"I was a very foolish girl," said Daisy, "and I feel dreadfully humble. Sam is sure to have told you what a narrow escape I had. Suppose I had married—Blister!"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Jonas.

"So it is nonsense," Mrs. Tickle agreed. "You were same as when they play at kissing-ring; you stood anent t' wrong man 'cos you couldn't fairly fashion to go to t' right un straight off. But you don't want to be too 'umble—it isn't good for men: not for t' best of 'em. They always think t' most o' t' plums 'at bides a bit o' getting."

Jonas made a grimace, but they both laughed, and then the young man said:

"I'm glad you've taken a liking for me, Mrs. Tickle, because you may see quite a lot of me in future. I'm going into partnership with Mr. Elliot, who bought Dr. Forsyth's practice, and he's going to turn this end over to me."

"Nay for sure!" Mrs. Tickle's face showed satisfaction as well as surprise. "Well, you don't know 'ow glad I am to 'ear it. Dr. Elliot's all right in 'is way, but he's too lah-di-dah for t' Brickfields, and we like someb'dy 'at's both plain and plain-spoken, like yourself. But I'm afraid you'll none find much money in 't."

"Never mind about that," said Jonas. "I'm going into it with my eyes open. The old doctor and I were very good friends and had many a chat about it before he died. I didn't see my way to take it then, but

things are different now. I only hope his mantle will fall on me and that I shall be able to continue his good work."

"T' mantle falls on them 'at waits to catch it," said Mrs. Tickle. "Eh, but you've lifted a load off my mind, and I could take to my bed again comfortable, which I never thought to do. If you get fast wi' any of 'em, sir, you just look in at No. 7."

"I promise you I will," said Jonas, heartily.

They willingly consented to taste Mrs. Tickle's ginger wine, and if that lady had thought well of Jonas before, her opinions became golden when she saw how he relished her shortbread, and how readily he made himself at home in her kitchen. When they went away, Jonas gave Cissie a shilling, which went into her money-box, but was not as much valued as the kiss Daisy bestowed upon her, which went into the chamber of precious memories.

Mrs. Tickle sat down to her knitting that evening in a contented frame of mind. Maud Annie and Arthur were out—Mrs. Tickle did not know where, and did not seek to know. Arthur's testimonials had been excellent, and his conduct left no room for uneasiness. Mrs. Tickle thought of her future son-in-law with quiet satisfaction.

Thomas was studying hard in his bedroom, preparing for an examination, which was full of possibilities. Cissie was also at her books, well and happy. Sam—

Mrs. Tickle lingered there. The boy had become very dear to her, and a bright yet whimsical look came into her eyes as she realised that it was nice to be "adopted" at her time of life by somebody who found his greatest pleasure in looking after her, and who was loyal to the core: loyal not only to her and to her

family but to the Brickfields. There was much comfort in that thought. The Brickfields was her world; the regions beyond were only pictures in a book of travel. Sam was satisfied with her world; had he been otherwise there would have been a little bitterness in her cup of contentment. He was a rogue, but a lovable one. He had ambition, but not of the soaring kind. He had not much interest in "the Book," but what could one expect? He must be guided, not pushed. One day, please God, he would marry Cissie, and they would have three very good friends in Mr. Knox and the new doctor and his wife.

Sam came in after a while, tired and hungry, but in boisterous spirits.

"Things is humming harder than ever since old Blister hopped it," he remarked, "but Jiminy! you should see how everybody skips round with a smile on their face. Mr. Knox, he isn't the same man, he isn't, and they say it's like old times. He says he's done with managers what's all grease and starch and scent. Scent! Jiminy! it used to be sulphur when t' boss was out o' t' way. He tells me he'd sooner see me manager nor another o' Blister's sort. You wait a bit, mother, and you'll see Sam Munday with 'Manager of t' Emporium' on his visiting cards."

"How you rattle on!" said Mrs. Tickle. "Shall I toast you another slice to stop your mouth?"

Later in the evening Sergeant Smith looked in and smoked a pipe.

"I'm on duty at ten," he remarked. "Gertie's come up to see Ellen, and the pair of 'em are clacking like hens with a young family. Gertie's same as she'd got new works to her inside this last week or two, and paid extra to have a giggle put in. I stood

it till I could stand it no longer, and then I came out."

He drew a parcel of trotters from the inside pocket of his coat and laid it on the table. "Let's have a bit o' supper, Sarah," he said. "It'll be like old times."

"Why, bless the man," said Mrs. Tickle. "You're all alike to-day—you men. Here's Sam telling 'at it's like old times at t' shop, and then you come wi' t' same tale. But you ought to be ashamed o' yourself, Frank Smith. When you've got a good wife like Ellen, old things ought to ha' passed away, as it says in t' Book."

"So they have," remarked Mr. Smith, sourly.

"It goes against t' grain, doesn't it, sergeant?" said Sam mildly, "to have to knuckle under when you've been used to being t' top dog all your life. You ought to ha' begun as you meant to go on—it's t' only way wi' t' quiet sort, such as Ellen."

"You shut up," said Mr. Smith, raising his chin. "Sarah's always saying that you lose naught by doing a kindness, but I lost threepence that night when I sent you up here, and a deal o' peace ever since."

"Tuppence," corrected Sam; "not threepence. And you didn't lose it: you put your money on a horse 'at 's going to come in a winner. And it's hard cheese anyway to have you talk so ungrateful when you'd never ha' known your dear wife but for me, to say naught of t' wedding present I gave you 'at cost five bob. Why don't you pawn it and pay yourself back?"

"That'll do, Sam," said Mrs. Tickle.

The sergeant winked slyly at Sam, then leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

"You never said naught to Gertie about that there matter, I reckon?" he asked.

Sam glanced at Mrs. Tickle. "Yes I did," he said stoutly, "and she told me all about it, and she said 'at if you wanted to know, you must ask her yourself. But I can tell you this much: if you think J. W.'s in this country you're mistaken. He hopped it, right enough."

Mr. Smith opened his eyes and looked languidly at Sam.

"That's a good job," he said. "Then I shall have to let him drop. I fancy you're right, and I've an idea we should have to look for him in South America. I heard of a chap that was going there, and I meant to have a word with him about J. W., chance he happened to come across him, but I got to Liverpool just after t' 'City of Mexico' had sailed, so I'd my journey for my pains. I was disappointed, but it isn't worth bothering about any more. You'll know t' fellow I mean—he used to work at your place—Mr.—Mr.—Lycester, his name was."

Sam flushed and looked at the sergeant, but the sergeant was looking at the ceiling.

THE END.





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